DOCTOR WHO

MATRIX

CHANGING CHANNELS

LOVEJOY

STAR TREK

3

CHANNEL SURFING

FOREVER KNIGHT

DS 9

QUANTUM LEAP

WIZARDS AND WARRIORS

DARK JUSTICE

CHANGING CHANNELS 3

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Editor's Note:

A word about the stories simply marked 'vampire'.

Did you ever think about how Nick Knight's (FK) power to control other people's minds could make everyday life more bearable? Well, we did, and the result was the vampire stories we call the 'Th-Thump' collection. Th-thump is the sound of a beating heart that vampires hear when imposing their will on someone. Enjoy.

FROM THE EDITOR
(aka The Minister of Commas and Other Picayune Punctuation)

An editor is only as good as the editorial staff, and boy, did I luck out!

To be honest, the credit for editing this 'zine should be spread equally among all those involved. With that in mind, I'd like to thank the following people for their creative spirit and dedication to this project:

Evelyn, who's been through all this before, and helped make sure all the bases were covered.

Keith, who stood by me through the trauma of "Disk error 34."

Jill, for sticking with it until the credits rolled on "Bijou Theater."

Pat, for her ASCII files, and for turning us on to "Matrix."

Mary, for her amazing ability to compose on the computer.

Laura, for producing great cover art in an incredibly short time.

Kathy, for being so prolific, and for her willingness to share ideas when inspiration flagged.

Linda, for her Naturally Enthusiastic Personality.

Hunter, for giving me her story on disk.

And, last but certainly not least, thanks to all of you who purchased Changing Channels 3. Enjoy!

Susan Patric

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AULD LANG SYNE
by Mary Shapiro

Nick Knight stood quietly, looking over coroner Natalie Lambert's shoulder at the dead man. Just after dark, the air was still and fragrant with spring flowers - like those at his home in France so long ago, Nick thought absently. The corpse in the garden was so out of place, the Toronto police detective thought, half smiling at the thought.

His partner, Don Schanke, wandered over. "You guys been in the library?" he asked, incredulous and munching on a candy bar. "You wouldn't believe the pictures and sculptures and art stuff this guy had -- I mean, I'm asking myself, hey, where's the Mona Lisa?"

Natalie smiled, a little desperately. "Yeah, Ray Einsel obviously had money and time -- yesterday," she said. "Now, he's got dibs on a wooden box and a six-foot hole."

Nick squeezed her arm. It was the job, he knew, that could make you cynical. The job and time -- centuries of time that he had lived as one of the undead. "Do we have any idea what was taken?" Nick asked quietly.

Schanke scratched his head. "That's what's crazy," he said. "Whoever did this guy in could have made off with some of the antique pendants and old coins on his desk. They were just lyin' there. Nobody touched 'em. But one of the servants seems to think some kind of old map's missin'." Schanke wadded his candy bar wrapper and tossed it casually on the ground.

"Schanke!" Natalie scolded gently, retrieving the wrapper. She smiled and handed it to Nick. "Good luck, crime doctors," she said, turning to walk back to the house.

Nick balled the paper in his hand thoughtfully.

"From what I'm hearin', Einsel had this map appraised a couple days ago by some kind of art guru," Schanke went on.

Nick turned to him. "Well, that's first on our list -- hey, thanks for volunteering to do that interview!"

Making a face, Schanke shoved his hands in his pockets. "Great -- we got a hot murder here, and I get to cross examine some artsy-fartsy fairy," he sighed, loping away after Nick.

****

Give me a night where I have a bird in my hands and twenty quid in my pocket, and that's my second favorite way to spend a Saturday night. I knew I was taking time away from my first favorite thing. See, I could have been rubbing elbows with some other choice con artists -- sorry, I meant antique dealers -- trying to snag a bargain at an art auction. Of course, there'd be no contest if I were there. Really, I'm not conceited. But, let's face it -- Lovejoy's the top dog in the antiques pack. The rest, well -- really, they don't have a clue.

Anyway, I happened to be spending a recent Saturday doing my second favorite thing, when I got this call from apprentice Eric Catchpole about my first favorite thing. I was interested -- but, as always, Eric's timing was awful.

"I know, I know -- look, the only reason I'm calling is this guy is really insistent -- and he's talking a lot of money to find this map," Eric whined disgracefully.

My inamorata was straightening her blouse and combing her hair -- damn. "Right, fine -- I'm coming down to the pub now. Oh, and thanks again, Eric. For everything," I said, through gritted teeth.

I made my apologies to bird Barbara -- there's always another day -- and bummed a cross-town bus back downtown. Finding my way down the dark street to the pub, I walked in and there was this bloke, chatting up Eric. I had a feeling about him right away.

I'm one who really believes in vibes - though I'm too stupid, mostly, to listen to them. This was one of the stupid times, and I swallowed my common sense. "Hallo, Eric -- and who do we have here?" I asked.

The bloke turned to face me -- and I suddenly knew how butterflies feel when they're being pinned to a board. "Mr. Lovejoy," said this guy, tall, pale, lean, white-blond hair, black leather jacket, and smooth as silk. He smiled and promptly gave me the creepies.

I grinned a little weakly. But, as I say, the best defense...

"What can I do for you, Mr...."

"LaCroix," he finished, moving closer to me. "I'm looking for a map, early 13th century, French, and I understand you have...connections."

I leaned against the bar, nonchalantly moving further away from him. "A map of what, exactly?" I asked. Charlemagne's wine cellar? I nearly said, but those tiger eyes stopped me.

Another toothy grin -- my, what big teeth you have, grandmother. "A castle in Normandy - Chateau de Soleil, the family LeBon," he went on, finally turning his eyes away and looking a little beyond me.

The name rang a bell -- not that I wanted to let on, of course. Knowledge is power. But I hadn't reckoned on helpful Eric.

"We were just reading about a find there!" he said, perking up.

"Hmm? Er, no, Eric -- that was in Norway, I think," I said, trying desperately to lead him away.

"No, it was definitely Normandy," he went on, unstoppable.

"Norway, Eric -- somewhere near the coast," I said, smiling through gritted teeth.

"They found some kind of buried treasure room, a few yards away from the main building," Eric twatted away brightly.

"On the western coast of Norway, I think it was," I fumbled, but, by then, it was hopeless. I let him spill his guts.

"Lots of family heirlooms, Crusaders' tribute, and all that lot -- and some of the papers were saying there was even more stuff somewhere else on the castle grounds but it couldn't be found," he said, letting the cat out of the bag, the door and the country.

LaCroix -- enjoying every second -- straightened his shirt

cuffs and patted Eric on the hand. "Yes, of course," he said. "What a brilliant assistant you have, Mr. Lovejoy. You wouldn't think of loaning him out, would you? I have a... taste for quick lads in my line of work."

I was soooo tempted -- but I bit my tongue. "Right, well -- Eric's far too useful to let go," I said, putting my arm around the lad's shoulders, gripping him. He didn't wince too loudly.

"Of course, we'll need to leave for France immediately. I know of one source we can start with. Oh, and shall we discuss a fee for your services?" LaCroix asked, reaching into his jacket.

I wanted to turn him down. Really, I did. I started to protest, but something shut me up. The bills were stacking up nicely on the bar. God, I love this job.

****

The sun setting, Nick leaned on his arm on the hood of his Cadillac, waiting for Schanke to come out of the Yonge Street Gallery. "What news, Horatio?" he asked.

Schanke sneered. "Think I'll be able to get the wine and cheese smell out of my suit?" he grumbled.

"Enough beer and kielbasa should do it," Nick replied, grinning.

"Yeah, well -- this Wesley guy was nearly our second DOA when I told him about Einsel and the map. Turns out he had the thing all along, but Einsel was really anxious to find out more about it. He was gonna send it to some kind of authority on this vintage stuff in France -- this guy apparently expects it." He pulled out a flat box and flipped open the lid. Yellowed and delicate with age, the map showed the layout of a building complex in delicate, hand-drawn lines.

"This map here is from the early 1200s, Normandy in France, of some castle called --" He squinted and tried to read the calligraphy.

Nick reverently took the box from him, and paled noticeably. "Chateau de Soleil," Nick finished, swallowing hard.

"Yeah, right," Schanke said, noticing Knight's reaction. "You heard of this place?"

"I've come across it once or twice in some studies," Nick said, his hands cradling the box gently.

"Wesley says a big archaeological dig was goin' on there last year. The castle belongs to the French authorities -- no survivors of the family left," Schanke went on.

Nick looked away. "No, no survivors," he said, his voice momentarily quavering.

Schanke touched him on the arm. "But listen to this, Nick, there's more -- I just called Stonetree, and he says we're cleared for a trip to France to backtrack this thing," Schanke said.

His cool demeanor broke -- the gleam in his eye was a lighthouse beacon. "Yesss, Nick! Just think of it! Gay Paree, the Folies Bergere, the Seine," Schanke went on, counting on his fingers. "This is the chance of a lifetime -- let's go, huh, Nick?"

Nick stared beyond him.

"Let's go together to Paris, Nichola! Please?" The lights of the candles in the Chateau de Soleil's massive stone bedroom reflected in the child's long blonde hair and pale, thin face. Her face was as white as the sheets.

"We'll go to Paris when you're feeling better, cherie," Nick said, cradling her in his arms. "They'll be calling me back to the Holy Land soon. But I'll be back by spring - King Louis promises. And we'll have a wonderful party for your birthday," Nick said tenderly.

He could hardly feel the weight of the emaciated body. Her body was cool, despite the fires blazing in the cavernous hearth. Nick tried to smile. "Just imagine - my little sister, 12 years old," he said, gasping as he swallowed back tears. "I remember the day you were born -- you were so beautiful, Yvonne. Mama loved you so much. I wish -- I wish you could have known her better."

The child smiled brilliantly and took his hand. "Nichola, will I see Mama in heaven?" she asked.

He embraced her, kissing her head. She couldn't see his tears. "Yvonne, you're going to get better." He saw the doctor's shadowed form in the hall, talking to his father and shaking his head. "Then, we'll have your party. After that, you'll see Paris."

His father's face was stony, blank.

"I'll keep you safe, cherie."

The doctor turned to walk into the room, a priest following behind him.

"Nothing can touch you, love."

Schanke tapped him on the shoulder. "I said, "nothing can touch this," he said. "You with me, Nick?"

Nick gripped his arm for a moment. "Sure, sure -- well, I suppose we should get packed."

****

"He's dead, Lovejoy, dead as dirt!" Eric said, ably stating the obvious as he gingerly looked over this passed-away punter. I, on the other hand, was trying to figure out how we could get out of the very dead Geraint Bennett's office before the Froggie coppers showed up at the Rue Magritte.

Eric rose off his knees. "He must have had a heart attack -- I don't see a mark on him, but, Jesus, he's so pale!" Eric rambled on, ready to topple over the edge of hysteria.

"Well, we know the map's not here," I said, mostly to myself. While Eric had insisted on flipping out over the body, I'd made a fairly thorough search of our ex-art historian's office. And -- nada, zip, zero.

We'd learned almost nothing from this bloke, in the first place. Yeah, he'd told us on the phone of hearing some rumor

that a kid's crypt was somewhere out on the Chateau de Soleil estate and the treasure hunters hadn't tripped over it. But beyond that -- the guy was absolutely hopeless. Hey, remember -- I'm not conceited.

Out of nowhere, I started to feel the creepies again and turned around.

"The map is actually here," said LaCroix, who topped Houdini to win the "appearing out of nowhere" award. "Well, a FAX copy, anyway. Isn't modern technology wonderful?"

Christ, I had a bad feeling about all this. LaCroix obviously didn't -- he looked the cat who swallowed the ostrich. He didn't blink at the stiff on the carpet.

"Ah, well -- you've got your map, then, so, uh, we'll be moving along," I mumbled. "Sorry we couldn't have been of more help. But, em, let us know how things work out. And, ah, I guess we'll be seeing you!" I grabbed Eric by the arm - he was just about turned to pudding by then -- waved cheerfully, and tried to back out of the office casually. By now, I thought, we'd had enough of our multicultural experience.

"Oh, but your job's not finished," LaCroix said, suddenly in front of the door in the time it took me to blink. "You've got a hired car, yes? Of course you do! We'll need it. Because we're going for a little drive to the countryside. To Normandy." Eric started snivelling.

Typical.

Thumpa, thumpa -- thought I heard a strange noise. I got the car keys out and tossed them over to Svengali. He smiled, the bastard. Thumpa, thumpa. There it was again.

"A drive? Oh, sounds like fun," I heard myself saying, like a blithering idiot. What's that old saw -- oh, to be in England now that spring is here?

****

A light rain was falling at dusk as Nick and Schanke finished their evening reconnoiter of Chateau du Soleil. Nick grimaced as he made his way around a tourist information desk. He swerved in time to avoid knocking his arm against some central heating ductwork.

Schanke sat down heavily and popped an antacid tablet. "I don't know, Nick, these people are supposed to be the world champs in the food biz," he said, "but can you get a decent cheeseburger in this country? I don't think so!" Schanke broke from chewing to glance at Nick. "Whatcha been doin' upstairs?" he asked.

Nick ran his fingers over the weathered stone of the fireplace mantlepiece. "Oh, just taking a look around. Looking for clues," he said softly. "So much has changed. I hadn't realized, it's been so long. They've got furniture in those rooms that would never have been here. Spanish, German things. They've cut the place up. The servants' quarters are bathrooms. It's so cold in here. And..." He noticed Schanke looking at him queerly. "History, reconstruction should be a precise science," Nick said, trying to recover. "Not just a hobby," he added, clearing his

throat.

Schanke didn't look convinced. "Yeah, sure, pal," he said. "Look, the rain's stopped, so let's take a look outside." Nick nodded. "I think the archaeological dig's about a half mile down the road, somewhere near the forest," Schanke said, grabbing his coat and a couple of flashlights.

Nick followed him out the door. "Closer than that -- a little over a fourth of a mile," he said. "There's a stone path going down off the road that takes you by the old grotto. Near a gazebo -- no, I don't think that's down there anymore."

Schanke put his hands on his hips. "Nick, you're makin' me believe in reincarnation," he said.

Moving ahead of him, Nick started down the road. "Intuition, Schanke, just a good cop's intuition," he said, smiling.

****

I pulled the Renault off the main road and along a rough stone path.

"Keep going a little past the dig -- park near that poplar," LaCroix said, leaning over from the back seat. He had taken off a heavy greatcoat and reflective shades.

He was so terribly pale -- must have some kind of skin problem, I thought.

The sun was entirely down. LaCroix's blue eyes reflected the tiny ceiling light eerily. Not that I'm afraid of the dark -- I've had enough fun in it -- but I could have hoped for more winning companions.

LaCroix looked thoughtfully at his copy of the map. I pulled in, turned off the motor, and sneaked a peek back at him. "Listen -- assuage my curiosity, will you?" I asked, figuring I had nothing to lose at this point. "What's your interest in this map? I'm assuming you offed Bennett for it?" LaCroix sat back leisurely. "Oh, yes -- Bennett and a fellow named Einsel in Canada," he said, preening. I waited for him to sharpen his claws. Just didn't want him to do it on me. "When I want something, I'm afraid I can be soooo single minded. A trait I've developed over a long time." He smiled, reached in his pocket and pulled out a small object. He flipped it over the seat to Eric. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

Eric -- who seemed less witless (well, calmer anyway) than earlier in the drive -- turned the tiny gold medallion over and struggled to read the old French.

After picking my jaw off the floor, I snagged the thing from Eric's clutches. "Hello, St. Peter -- I've died and gone to heaven," I whistled reverently. It was the real thing -- a personal token to a top officer in the Crusades from Louis IX, the big guy, St. Louis. This thing was worth millions of pounds -- rare as hens' teeth, as my gran would have said. These days, they'd give out T-shirts that say "I survived the Crusades -- and all I got was this lousy T-shirt."

"There's more where that came from," sneered the Grinchy Grinch. "Much more -- I've had a lot of time to... acquire certain items. But I've got a particular yen for some...

artifacts... that belonged to the family of a...very dear friend. Having them is like...having him near me."

My throat was getting dry. I felt for the poor sod he wanted so badly. And I was just about deaf from the thumpa-thumpas.

"In fact, I think... I feel him, very near us now," he added gently, wetting his lips.

Breaking the mood, LaCroix locked eyes with mine. Eric was giving me a sickly sidelong glance -- he either had to piss or throw up, and I suddenly wanted to be out in the fresh air. We stepped out into the chilly April fog and moved toward the broken earth.

While I was afraid for my neck with LaCroix around, I was hoping I didn't break it myself first, slogging through the muck in the bloody pitch dark. Staggering after us, Eric caught up, and I pushed him in front of me -- his green face was bright as a lantern. But LaCroix was like a cat -- his eyes seemed to glow in the dark and he didn't put a toe astray, though Eric and I barely kept our balance.

"Stop where you are -- right there, or you'll fall down the steps," LaCroix suddenly hissed.

Not anxious to trundle down into what could be my own last resting place, I pulled up and yanked Eric back. LaCroix pushed through us. He turned for a moment and gave Eric a queer look. "A little snack wouldn't go awry," he said, turning his face to Eric. Then he hesitated. "Perhaps a little later. Let's have a taste of something colder and prettier first," LaCroix said, starting down the stairs. We followed his bobbing white head into the blackness.

****

"Geez, Nick -- we have found the middle of nowhere," Schanke said, shining the flashlight into the darkness.

Knight seemed not to hear him at first. Turning suddenly to his friend, he motioned him on. "We're going in the right direction," Knight said. "Come on, Schanke, we've got to hurry. There's something -- I've got a bad feeling."

Schanke stopped and tried to clear some mud off his shoes. "Forty-nine bucks at Eaton's -- and these shoes are trashed," he groused, disgusted. "Look, we're not gonna accomplish diddley if we can't see. Stonetree'll bust our butts if we kill ourselves on company time. Let's head ba...."

Knight suddenly motioned him to silence.

"What?..." Schanke started, but Knight pleaded for quiet again. He had turned his own flashlight off and grabbed Schanke's. "Quiet, Schanke -- follow me, I can see where we're going," Knight hissed. "There's somebody in the vault." The two men walked forward for a couple minutes, Schanke with a death grip on Knight's arm. "Okay, stop," Knight said, barely audible. "Here are the stairs. Careful, they're shaky. Feel for the first one -- yeah, right there. Okay, four more down. Now you're on the ground. Come straight ahead, but lean down a little, the ceiling's low."

Schanke teetered on the edge of the last step and touched

ground, grimacing and balancing himself by stretching his arm out to the damp stone wall. "I smell smoke," he whispered suddenly, reaching into his shoulder holster.

Nick put his hand on Schanke's. "Careful about firing in here. These walls weren't reinforced well enough last fall before the winter closed in on the dig," he mouthed into Schanke's ear. "Keep moving. There -- can you see that?"

His companion could make out a flickering light. He nodded to Knight.

"Someone's lit a torch," Knight said. Schanke could barely see Nick's stern face in the low illumination. "Keep to the side of the wall. I'll go ahead." They came to a bend in the tunnel, where some stones had been heaved away from the wall. Dust was heavy in the air, as if this corridor had just been opened. "Bastard," Schanke thought he heard Knight curse, but couldn't be sure. "Stay here."

Schanke started to protest. But something in his partner's gaze -- something terrible in eyes that looked green and ghastly in the dark -- made him freeze.

Knight moved slowly. He heard voices ahead of him.

****

"Why the hell would the family close up a chamber like this as a hidey-hole for a lead box?" Eric whined, the clammy, uncomfortable rat trap causing his fairer nature to reassert itself.

"A king's ransom in the rest of this place, and a box in here?" LaCroix neatly picked some dirt from his fingernails and moved to what looked too much like a coffin to me. For once, I wanted to be wrong.

"Don't judge a box by its cover," LaCroix said and ran his hand over the top, feeling for something. He found an indentation and lifted a piece from the top of the casket to reveal a glass plate.

I came a little closer and looked down. It was a girl's face -- a child, an angel, preserved in the amber of air that hadn't been disturbed for hundreds of years.

"Diable -- stand away from her!" I heard, and, if my blood wasn't already chilly, it was popsicles now. Eric gasped. LaCroix's eyes brightened, and I turned around.

This blond guy -- he had a Dudley Doright look to him -- was taking up the entryway, staring down LaCroix. Dudley was positively throwing daggers at our loveable Snidely Whiplash -- who didn't flinch an inch. Great, I thought to myself. If Eric and I could slip by these two while they were occupied with throttling each other...

I felt in my pocket for the keys to the Renault.

"Nichola - I've missed you so much," LaCroix said icily. "I'm so happy you got my...invitation. I've been so lonely without you." He turned to the coffin. "I have a gift for you, Nichola -- see what I've found?" he said, running his hand over the glass.

"It's our sister, Nichola, my brother. For what is yours...is mine."

I shuddered as the ghoul leaned down to the glass and touched his lips to it. "Where shall I keep her? Perhaps like a doll in a pretty shadowbox or perhaps..." he smiled. "She is so perfectly preserved. And, Nichola, you have no idea how much I know, how much I've learned about us and what we can do. My blood runs in you. Shall I taste her, Nichola? Shall I bring her over? She can be with you, be with us, again -- forever."

Believe me, I've seen some furious blokes in my time -- there was that unfortunate time with Barbara's husband... But, anyway...

I looked at the man at the door and understood what people mean by shaking with fury. I turned away for a half second, and the two were at it. At the time, it seemed so fast, as though this new guy had flown to LaCroix's throat.

After that, I guess Eric and I must have passed out. I guess.

****

"You'll never touch her -- I'll send you to hell first," Knight growled, eyes blazing green and fangs exposed. Knight's hands around his throat, LaCroix's eyes were still triumphant.

"As long as we are together," he smiled, gathering his strength and throwing his assailant off. "Don't you know yet? Nichola, you'll never be rid of me." LaCroix's own fangs were bared. Knight grabbed for the torch illuminating the room and shoved it toward his tormentor.

The two humans in the room had edged to the walls, out of harm's way -- as much as possible -- and in the thrall of Knight's will.

LaCroix laughed. "Oh, Nichola, you think it's so easy to send me away," he crooned. "But I adore you, my child, my brother, my...."

Gripped suddenly with cold terror, Knight slashed out at LaCroix. But the vampire easily dodged the blow.

Knight paused for a moment. And made the decision. He feinted at LaCroix, who stepped back. Knight turned suddenly and lunged, instead, at the coffin. His fist was raised. One second, two seconds, he stared at Yvonne's face. She was perfect, radiant....

"Nichola, don't be afraid - I'll be with Mama in heaven. She'll take care of me. Don't be lonely. We'll wait for you, Nichola, we'll wait."

The blow smashed the glass. Cold wet air rushed in, mingled with ancient dryness. Before his eyes, the figure in the casket deflated. Delicate lines softened and fell. Down and in. Like the night melting into the morning, like the moon giving way to the sun.

Across the chamber, LaCroix made an animal sound. For a moment, the mask was down, and Knight was able to see him. Oedipus, naked.

"Why? We could have had, had..." he whispered, the vampire gone away for a fleeting moment.

Knight touched his mind.

"You never could tell what I was feeling -- I was never able to teach you that," LaCroix had said. For a second, he could. Welts on a beaten child. Blood from the most vile abuse. A boy watching a man -- their own father -- above the little girl, Sophia, Oedipus' own sister. Later, the child's body buried in a hasty grave.

"OUR sister," Knight remembered LaCroix saying. And then...Jeanette's words echoed in his ears.

"He does look like your father, doesn't he?"

"You're right. The resemblance is uncanny." LaCroix's face was blank as he turned to the old man.

"Tell me you love me -- father. Say, 'I love you, Oedipus.' Say,'I'm sorry, Oedipus,' and 'forgive me, Oedipus, my son, for the treacherous introduction to the world that I gave you.'"

Knight turned to Lacroix, horrified. "Oedipus killed his father by accident."

Knight would never forget the look in his mentor's eyes. "Nobody believes that -- not anymore," LaCroix whispered. After that, there was only blood.

For an instant, Oedipus -- that small, horrified boy, who had died in childhood as surely as his sister had -- was with Knight in the room. But the moment was gone in an instant. The overwhelming pain Knight sensed was clothed again, buried under centuries of -- what? The insatiable urge to repeat lessons learned at this monster of a father's knee? Nick looked again. And LaCroix was gone.

****

I was warming up myself as Eric shivered and sipped his mug of tea, happy to be in any pub -- even in France.

"I just don't remember, can you, Lovejoy?" he said, and looked at me stupidly.

For once, I felt the same. Christ, I needed to get back home if I was thinking such shit, I figured.

Our two knights in shining armor - well, one Knight, anyway, and this Pollack -- traded a smile between them. Well, I thought, maybe not all coppers are cads -- the ones in Canada, anyway. "Christ, I'm as blank as a brick - LaCroix got away?" I asked Knight, for the third time. I hadn't had anything so exotic as a fainting fit since I faked one to get away from a headmaster's thrashing as a kid.

Knight was cool as a cucumber. "I guess so -- I'm glad we were able to get you two out of there before the roof caved in," he said and turned to his pal. "I told you that roof was no good, Schanke."

Joe Friday scratched his bald noggin. He'd apparently keeled over as well, though he wasn't so keen about admitting it.

"Look, Nick - just promise me you'll do the paperwork on this for Stonetree when we get back," he said.

Knight nodded to him. "I'm anxious to write some things down, to remember -- for the report," he said, looking kind of far away.

Well, I'd leave the writing to them. I'm more the action type myself. After all, Barbara was still waiting...

THE TWELVE DAYS OF QUANTUM LEAP

by

Evelyn Adrian

On the first day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
A postcard from NBC.

On the second day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Two neon stars,...

On the third day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Three pics from I-man,...

On the fourth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Four Quantum books,...

On the fifth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Five dead cigars,...

On the sixth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Six Ph.D.'s,...

On the seventh day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Seven garish jackets,...

On the eighth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Eight tapes of talk shows,...

On the ninth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Nine TV Guide plugs,...

On the tenth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Ten script ideas,...

On the eleventh day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Eleven "Oh, boy" versions,...

On the twelfth day of Christmas, the network gave to me:
Twelve Quantum seasons!

ALL THESE CHAINS

by Kathy Keetch

Sarah Jane Smith had gotten lost in time, so thoroughly lost that it was years before the Doctor even realized she was gone. Time, especially his own time-line, had gotten so folded and confused when Borusa went renegade, that his later selves hadn't known that Sarah had never made it back to South Croyton. She had left Gallifrey with the third Doctor, but the temporal displacements had been so severe with four versions of the Doctor splitting off from one location that none of the Time Lords realized that she hadn't been returned to her own time line. The third Doctor's Sarah was still there, the fourth Doctor's Sarah hadn't changed, but the Sarah that had braved Rassilon's tomb had vanished. K-9 Mark III knew she was missing, but he could do nothing more than send out a distress signal, which would only be picked up when the Doctor next passed through that time period; and then only if he was paying attention.

It was a very long, very lonely wait. K-9 had to shut down most of his functions, concentrating his power on the signal. He could still tell, if he restored enough power to read the memory, how long he had been waiting, but the most significant indicator was that when the Doctor did turn up, he had regenerated a sixth time.

"What is it, Professor?" K-9 heard. It was a young voice, female, human, London accent.

"It's a friend. A friend of a friend, you could say." Relays that had been shut down for a long time opened again at that voice. Interestingly, it seemed to have picked up a Scottish burr, but it was male, ageless, and he could now identify the speaker as a Time Lord.

"Friend. Master?" K-9 asked, his voice synthesizer harsh from disuse.

"Easy, old friend, easy," the Doctor assured him. "What's happened? But take your time."

Between them they had pieced out what must have happened, which still only answered "what", "how" and to "whom" and gave no clue as to "when" or "where". The Doctor was working on it immediately, though, even as he hauled K-9 to the TARDIS. He had plugged K-9 into the regenerative power cells of the TARDIS console and gone off into a brown study. His companion eventually gave up waiting for him, and had introduced herself as "Ace". She seemed brave, loyal, competent, and genuinely distressed over Sarah's disappearance. K-9 was calling her "Mistress" even before he was recharged.

Finding Sarah took a long time. The Doctor kept reassuring Ace, though, that if they could pick up her time stream, they'd be able to rescue her and return her to her proper place in time. K-9 would have to stay, since the Doctor insisted there could be no going back on his time-line; but there was a good chance that Sarah could be rescued with little to no temporal irregularities. He talked often of Sarah, and Ace came to like her quite a bit just from the Doctor's descriptions. Ace also discovered that K-9 was the third of his kind, and she was glad for the Doctor that the automaton was there. The Doctor seemed pleased to have a K-9 aboard, and it seemed to help him control his worries about Sarah's safety. He seemed quite optimistic, actually, right up to the moment when he finally found a trace of her.

"But Professor, that's wonderful!" Ace had said.

"I hope it is," the Doctor had answered.

"What's wrong? K-9?" Ace had learned quickly that the little robotic dog would give full, if over-literal answers to questions that the Doctor was apt to shrug off.

"The Sarah-Mistress's time line has been traced to Earth, North American continent, mid-19th century," K-9 explained.

"And will you be able to pinpoint any closer than that?" Ace asked.

"Affirmative," K-9 replied.

"Well, Professor, we've found her! Why the long face? Are you afraid that the TARDIS won't be able to pick her up just after she landed?" As soon as she said it, Ace realized that that was exactly the problem. The TARDIS was a marvelous machine, but it did seem to have its own ideas about when or where it would go. They may not have found her at the point when she first materialized, and Ace realized that the Doctor was haunted by the thought of Sarah Jane dying of old age while waiting for rescue. "It'll be all right, Doctor," she soothed. "You'll see."

"Ace, how well do you know your history? Your <u>American</u> history?" he asked.

She had had to admit that even British history had not been her strongest subject in school.

"We might just get in before," the Doctor said hopefully, not explaining further. "K-9? Anything more definite on the year yet?"

"There is a plus or minus factor of 15 years yet," the little robot reported.

"There's a chance. What about the area? Narrowing down? Any chance 'North America' means Canada? California?"

"Professor, what's wrong?" Ace insisted. "K-9 what are you trying to avoid?"

"The American Civil War," K-9 began, "also commonly known as the War between the States. Also known as the War for Southern Independence, the War for States' Rights, the War of the Rebellion, the Lost Cause, the War for the Union..."

"That's enough, K-9," the Doctor snapped. "Didn't you learn anything in school, Ace? The first so-called 'modern' war in human history is in the time frame that Sarah is trapped in. More than 600,000 soldiers died in that war. The civilian casualties were never high enough to be counted in the history books; but even if Sarah Jane isn't caught in the Vicksburg siege or in Sherman's path as he marched through Georgia and the Carolinas, even if she's well away from the battlelines, there's little chance that she wouldn't be affected somehow."

Ace, remembering her brief time spent on the edges of World War II, could only agree. "We'll get there in time, Professor," she said.

"Hm. K-9?"

Unencouragingly, the error corridor narrowed toward 1860, not 1850, and the physical location was not going to be across the border or on the opposite coast.

"Wait, wait, it's going north," the Doctor had said once, after a horrible few moments when the search grid included northern Virginia. The time wasn't edging back into the later, bloodier years of the war, but it didn't look as if they would miss it completely. In the end, though, they found <u>her</u>, and that's what mattered.

"Where are we, K-9," the Doctor asked as they materialized.

"North American continent, state of Rhode Island, town of Smithfield, Master," the canine computer concluded.

"And the date?" Ace asked.

"Second week in August, 1861, Mistress," came the answer.

"It's still early in the war, isn't it, Doctor? And if she only just got here herself..." She couldn't finish, the Doctor having already left the TARDIS. Ace followed more slowly, hampered by the long, full skirt the Doctor had insisted that she wear.

"We don't want to attract attention," he had said, so she had hurriedly changed as they zeroed in on this time and place, not even arguing about having to wear the hoop skirt out of consideration for the Doctor's worries. He, of course, had simply strode out in his usual clothes, but at least he had ordered K-9 to stay.

"You can watch the monitor," Ace had told him as she hurried after the Doctor.

"The Monitor will not be commissioned until January 30, 1862," K-9 had said plaintively; but he had stayed.

Ace struggled down the alley they had materialized in, catching up with the Doctor at the end of it, as he surveyed the street before them. He was aiming what looked like a compass.

"This way," he said, leading the way past a row of graceful New England houses.

"She'll be all right, won't she, Doctor?" Ace said, stating it more than asking it, trying to be reassuring. "Look at this place, what could happen here?"

The Doctor slowed, then stopped. He was facing a house, as neat and white-painted prim as the rest, but shadowed with black crepe hanging from the windows, twined on the porch rails, and wreathed on the door.

"But it's so early," the Doctor said.

"Maybe she's just visiting," Ace offered, though not believing it either. When the Doctor made no move, she grabbed his arm. "Come on, Professor, we have to know."

Ace now led the way, onto the porch to knock at the sad door. A tall, graying woman answered, and Ace asked for Sarah.

"You know Sarah?" the woman asked.

"We have mutual acquaintances," Ace assured her, adding "and the Doctor, here, is an old friend."

"A doctor?" the woman asked, eying his colorful cardigan. He politely doffed his Panama hat. "Well, you'd better come in."

"Yankee to the bone," the Doctor murmured to Ace as they followed their guide to a back parlor door.

"Sarah, dear, there's some folks to see you," the woman called, knocking on the door. She opened it and gestured them in. Ace somehow maneuvered her skirts in, and the Doctor followed, only to stop barely past the threshold.

"Oh Sarah Jane," he murmured.

They were too late, Ace realized, for the first thing they saw was a small child and then a second one, curled up next to a dark form. There was a rustle of material and, gradually, Ace could make out the face of a small, determined looking woman, nearly overwhelmed in the veils of widow's weeds.

"Doctor?" the young widow asked.

"You do know them?" the first woman asked, concerned.

"I, I think so. Oh <u>yes</u>," she said, staring at the Doctor. "I do know him. Them," she added, looking at Ace.

"Come along, then, children," the woman said, entering to gather up the youngsters. "Your mother has visitors."

She had passed in front of Sarah, who briefly put her hand out and pressed the older woman's hand. Ace could see the tears in both women's eyes as the children were shooed out.

"My mother-in-law," Sarah said bleakly.

"Her son?" the Doctor asked.

"Yes," Sarah choked, trying to hold back a sob.

"Go ahead," Ace said, sitting down next to Sarah and putting her arm around her. "I'm Ace," she added.

Sarah shook once, then recovered.

"You certainly must be, to put up with <u>him</u>," she said gallantly, gesturing at the Doctor.

"Sarah Jane, what can I say? I tried to trace you, to get to you before anything happened to you. I'm sorry any of this happened," the Doctor said sincerely.

"Sorry? <u>Sorry</u>?" Sarah was almost indignant. "I'm not."

"We got on your track as fast as we could and, uh," the Doctor paused. "You're not sorry?"

"Doctor, I won't deny that there weren't a lot of times that I was furious at you, at the whole bloody lot of Time Lords for letting me get dumped into and abandoned in this, this..."

"Victorian?" Ace supplied helpfully.

"Thank you. Yes, Victorian place. I won't pretend that I don't hate the double morality system, the oppression, the, the..."

"Victorian."

"The Victorianess of this place. But..." Sarah's tirade faded away.

"But?" Ace asked softly. "You found something? Someone?"

"I'll tell you, since I don't think the Doctor is capable of understanding," Sarah stated, turning her serious eyes to Ace, away from the hurt in the Doctor's eyes. "Even in this century, it's still a lot of rubbish that a woman can't be complete without a man and children. Women may be treated as inferior, but they certainly can have a life outside the home if they care to. And I will, I will. But any kind of life, no matter what you choose to do, is the better for having someone at your side, whether mother, sister, friend, father, brother, lover..."

"Companion," the Doctor added.

There was a moment's silence, then Sarah blew her nose gustily.

"I'm going to work for the Sanitation Commission for the duration of the war. Nearly two-thirds of the men that will die will die from disease, and I want to try to prevent as many of those deaths as possible. And afterwards, I'm going to be a teacher," she affirmed quietly. "I'm going to do what I can to get rid of as much ignorance as is humanly possible."

"You aren't going back to journalism?" the Doctor asked, surprised. "You could beat Nelly Bly in going around the world. You could, er..."

"Try to dispel some of the scarring hates that the next four years are going to leave," Sarah said, still very quietly. "Even if I couldn't do anything about the fears and injustices that brought the war on." She paused, then resolutely added, "Besides, Susan B. Anthony is going to need some help before the

century is out."

"That's the spirit!" Ace exclaimed.

"You wouldn't even consider coming back, would you?" the Doctor asked.

Sarah shook her head slowly. "No. I couldn't. Liberation doesn't mean turning your back on your responsibilities. Even if I could," she added, so faintly they could barely hear her.

"The children?" Ace gently asked.

"I have to see them grown, in this, their own time. Now my time. He won't. And..." She started breaking down. "My husband..." She was crying again, and she groped towards a Bible that lay on a side table, a piece of paper marking the family tree. The Doctor opened it, ran a casual eye down the family names, then paused. He looked at the folded paper more carefully, removed it, and unfolded it.

"Sarah Jane?" he asked.

"Read it to me," she whispered, her eyes closed tightly, tears leaking out and running down her cheeks. "I can't get enough of it."

Ace gathered her in tightly, holding her as both women listened to the Doctor. Long after they had made their farewells and left Sarah to her new life, Ace would remember that scene, the quiet burr of the Doctor's voice as he read the last letter of a Union major to his wife.

> July 14, 1861
> Camp Clark, Washington
>
> My very dear Sarah:
>
> The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days--perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more...
>
> I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and

sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing--perfectly willing--to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt...

Sarah my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me unresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and seen our sons grown up to honorable manhood, around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me--perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar, that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness...

But, O Sarah! if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest night...<u>always</u>, <u>always</u>, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again....

As the Doctor's voice faded out, Sarah Jane no-longer Smith said quietly, "Sullivan Ballou was killed a week later at the first battle of Bull Run."

A Scent of Change

by Jill Lundberg

'Well, I've been here two weeks now and nobody has asked me about them yet, maybe I really can do this job,' he thought as he walked down the aisle toward the swinging doors at the back of the store. About halfway there, he was accosted by a little old lady wheeling a squeaky shopping cart.

"Excuse me, young man," she said. "Can you show me where the garlic and dill are?"

"Um-m-m", he sputtered, his eyes growing big. "I'll get somebody to help you." He started to walk away, but she grabbed his arm.

"I don't have time to wait around," she angrily retorted.

"It's near the end of the aisle by the radishes," he pointed.

"My eyes aren't like they used to be sonny, you'll have to show me," she responded as she pushed him ahead of her down the aisle.

He walked a few steps further and repeated nervously, "It's right there by those radishes.

She ignored him and continued to push the cart and him even closer. "I want you to help me select some good garlic cloves," she stated. "It's a special meal for my daughter's 10th wedding anniversary."

"I don't think I'm the person to help you pick out....garlic." He spat out the last word in disgust. "I'll go get someone to help you right away."

"Now see here young man," she started up again.

He wondered if she would say that if she knew how old he really was.

"I come to this store because you advertise extra service with a smile," she exclaimed as she pushed him almost face down into the food. With the reek of garlic in his nose, he thought the last thing he should do was smile. She whirled him around to continue her tirade, but he'd had enough. Stepping away from the produce, he looked her straight in the eye.

"You do not like garlic."

Th-thump. Th-thump. Th-thump.

"You have never liked garlic."

Th-thump. Th-thump. Th-thump.

"You will never like garlic."

Th-thump. Th-thump. Th-thump.

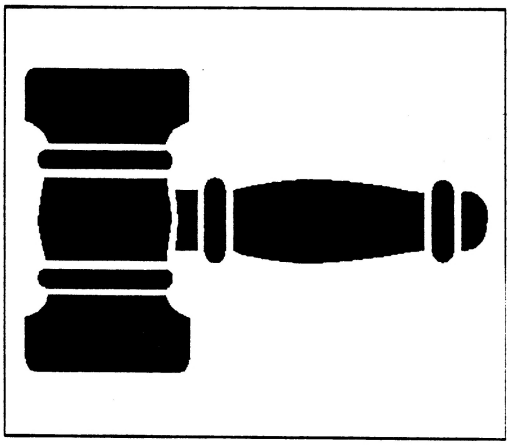
His eyes turned fiery red as he continued. "You will pick out some rutabagas and eggplant. They are your favorite foods." He let out a low chuckle when he finished.

"Y-e-s," she stammered, her eyes glazed over.

He broke the gaze, turned and walked back up the aisle. Just before he reached the swinging doors, he heard the old lady's voice.

"Young man," she started hesitantly, "Can you show me where the rutabagas and eggplant are?"

Join us next time for another exciting adventure of
Michael Mort, Vampire Produce Manger.



Vampire Law
by Margaret Hynes

The average looking young man stared earnestly out from the television screen.

"Hi my name is Bill Huntman and you know my law firm, Greenberg and Huntman. We specialize in night court cases and only night court cases. Speeding, DWI, suspension, hardship driving, DUI, point problems. We can handle all your legal needs.

We'll sink our teeth into your case. No one has as long a history of success as we do. We'll be on the prowl, looking out for your interests. We're out for blood. No one will represent you like we do.

We're awake while the city sleeps. Easy credit terms available.

We're open all night for your convenience. Call or come on in anytime from sunset to sunrise. We'll be here.

Greenberg and Huntman, remember, we're your law firm. Th-thump, th-thump.

WHERE NO ONE MAN HAS GONE BEFORE: AT LEAST NOT ON SCREEN

by Laura Lee Kyro

This skit won first place in a writing competition at a STAR TREK convention held in St. Louis, and was read on stage by Scotty (James Doohan) and Chekov (Walter Koenig) themselves.

SCENE: It is nearing the end of the Enterprise's five-year mission to explore new worlds, seek out new horizons, and to boldly go where no where no one has gone before. It's a time for saying goodbye and remembrance of times past. As the vessel heads home for the ''final'' time (hey, who figured on the movies?), Scotty and Chekov meet in the recreation room on Level 23. Chekov is already there, singing ''The Volga Boatman'' to himself as he drinks a bottle of 'Wodka'. Scotty is on his way, carrying his own brand of happiness, Scotch. They are both a bit tipsy.

CHEKOV

(To the tune of the Volga Boatman)
Da da da de da dum..(swig)..da da da da da de da dum (swig)...

(Scotty enters)

Ah, Meester Scott, my old comrade. Come in, sit down, have drink with me? Is Wodka, guaranteed to put hair on chest.

SCOTTY

Aye, and thank ye kindly, but I have a wee bit of me own dear brew. Perhaps you'll be wanting to try some Scotch?

CHEKOV

Ah, Scotch. Created in Russia, but long ago we give to Scotland in culture exchange. They try to give us skirts for our men to wear, but winters in Russia very cold, so we give Scotch no charge. Thanks much, but I stick with Wodka. Salute!

SCOTTY

In your eye!

Both take an extended number of swigs from their bottles.

CHEKOV

So, nearing end of mission. I believe everyone here glad to

go home. What plans you have Meester Scott.

SCOTTY

Mr. Scott indeed! Scotty, please. Well, my family has a wee bit of land on the coast of Scotland. A beautiful bit o' shore unspoiled by the passage of time and civilization. (swig) I thought I might build a few condominiums on it and retire to Los Angeles. Or I might stay on with Starfleet. You never know when they might need another engineering instructor for the Academy. (swig) Oh, I know that most of the recruits are asking for the glamour jobs, like Captain, but give me a ship w' a good engine room, and I'll show you a ship I could coax up to Warp 10 with nary a whimper. And what about you Mr. Chekov?

CHEKOV

You must call me Pavel. Good Russian name. All good names were invented in Russia. I believe the name Scott may originally have come from Russia. (swig) I stay on with Starfleet. Ask to join new mission, or perhaps will specialize in weapons. With experience we have on Enterprise, could get special projects job maybe. Have Keptin Kirk put in good word for me.

SCOTTY

Aye, the Captain might do that for ye. What a man is the Captain. Hasn't left that bridge for more than a couple of hours at a time over the past five years. Spock, Sulu and Uhura, too. Every time I go up to the bridge, there they be. Their overtime will be incredible! (swig)

My guess is that after docking, they'll spend the next six months sleeping. Down in the engine room I can get a wee bit of shut-eye. And you, Pavel, the past three years you've spent most of your time on the bridge.

CHEKOV

Ah, but have no trouble. Good supply of Arcturian amphetamines. Keep you awake 3 weeks at a time. Of course, I only take during crisis situations--say every three, four days. Non addictive. Must originally have been made in Russia. (swig) I wonder how Keptin Kirk does it. He is on bridge most always, yet he knows every woman on ship by name. Considerate man is Keptin to take trouble to learn all names. (swig) Did you know? Spock was seen giving small smile three weeks ago.

SCOTTY

I heard. Though I don't know if we could call it an official smile. So what's the count up to now?

Chekov pulls paper from his pocket and reads.

CHEKOV

Since start of mission Meester Spock has had one slight chuckle, 15 tight smiles, 4 worried expressions, 7 puzzled looks--3 with raised right eyebrow, and 4 with left. Henderson down in maintenance is betting year's pay he smiles once more before end of mission. He says Keptin is in on bet too, and plans to pick fight with Doctor McCoy to do it.

SCOTTY

I don't think I'd like to take him up on that one. Now, I don't mean to be putting in bug in your ear...but I understand Mr. Ears...ah...Spock is leavin' Starfleet and going back to Vulcan. Some kind of ritual. Comes out if it with no feelin's a'tall. Kind of like a washboard with legs. (swig) Now, are you sure you wouldn't be wantin' a bit of me Scotch? I once had a bottle of very, very, very old scotch (burp) whiskey. I was savin' it f'r just this occasion, but me and another fellow--I believe his name was Tomar--drank it a while ago.

CHEKOV

I think I will be missing everyone when we go. I get to know them so well. Lieutenant Uhura and her hailing frequencies always open. Doctor McCoy and Spock always fighting. Mr. Sulu always laying courses in. Just like one big happy Russian family. You have family back home?

SCOTTY

Aye. A sister and her husband, and they have a wee lad, me nephew. I think he'd like to join starfleet when he's older. Wants to be an engineer. (With pride) Chip off the old engine block! (swig)
Well, it's been nice chattin' w' ye Pavel. But I think I'm goin' to take me bottle and go off on a trek of me own. I'm going to try to find something on this ship I've been wanting to see for five years. Seein' the voyage is about over, I believe it's time.

CHEKOV

I know very place you mean. Heard rumor is one near botanics section, but never had chance to check out. Perhaps I go with you?

SCOTTY

Sure and I'd be happy to have you along.

Both rise, and with arms around each other head for the door.

CHEKOV

If we find it, we let Keptin know. I understand he has been looking for it, too. Meester Spock, of course, doesn't need to use it.

SCOTTY

Aye. And if we be successful, we can even post a notice in the crew room that we, you and me, Mr. Chekov, have found a bathroom on the Enterprise!

THE END

Halloween Knight
by Margaret Hynes

Detective Nicholas Knight let a mild expletive escape his lips.

"What's wrong, Knight? Is the big bad machine getting the best of one of Toronto's finest?"

Knight turned on the partner that had been forced upon him by his Captain. Detective Schanke thought he detected an odd glint in Knight's eyes but he then shrugged it off. The lights in the squad room weren't very good.

Knight turned back to the computer screen and when he faced Schanke again his eyes had regained their usual color.

"Schanke why don't you come over here and show me how it's done?"

"No, thank you, I barely have enough time to get home and change before Nat's party. You had better get going too, unless of course you're going as Batman and intend to fly." He laughed at his own joke. No one else did.

"Okay, okay, so maybe I have a few minutes. Boy, since the Captain ordered us all to learn to use these monsters everyone's been so uptight. What seems to be the problem?"

"Yesterday I began a report. Today it's gone. I called the chief programmer and she explained the procedure to me for the hundredth time. I'm sure she understood what she's talking about but she talks so fast and its all so complicated it might as well be Greek. Finally I just thanked her and hung up."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. You and me, we're just too old to learn these new tricks. Are you sure you didn't just get the file name wrong?"

"Yes, I am sure I didn't just get the file name wrong. Look, the back up file is there but the original is gone."

"So what's the problem? Restore the backup."

"Oh so clever, Schank. Look at what happens when I call up the directory." He put in the file name and up popped the name of the back up showing 9.4 k's of material were in that file.

"Okay, now see what happens when I ask to enter that file."

The computer hesitated a fraction of a second and then the file was open. The only problem was that nothing was on the screen but the file name. No data was in a file that was indexed as containing several pages of information.

"See what I mean? The information is there but it isn't."

"I see," Schanke said thoughtfully. "It appears there is only one explanation. It's the ghost of computers past. You know, the spirit of one of those big machines that used to fill an entire room before microchips were invented, and now it's smarter and it resents being cooped up in such a small box."

"Schanke."

"Well, wouldn't you hate it?"

"I always did." Knight said under his breath.

"Okay, okay, do what I always do when this kind of situation presents itself."

"Which is?"

"Mentally make a list of the ten most interesting things you can do with a dead PC. Modern Art. A planter perhaps."

"Thanks, Schanke, you've been a great help. Now why don't you hurry on and get ready for Nat's. I'm sure she won't consider the party really started until you arrive. What are you going as, anyway?"

"You'll have to wait until you get there to find out."

"I'm not going," Knight said. "I've got plenty of work to do."

"Yeah, it is pretty dead around here. But Knight, all work and no play makes you a dull detective. But then you are pretty dull already. Come on, live a little. You shouldn't work on your day, or night, off. You'll get old before your time. Get some excitement in your life. Get the old blood boiling, the old heart pumping, the old... well, you get the picture."

"Yes, Schank I do, and it's not pretty. Now why don't you run along? I am not coming."

"Yes, you are," Schanke stated.

"No, I'm not," Knight retorted.

"Yes, you are," a feminine voice said.

"Schanke, that's a very good trick."

"Cute," Schanke said as Natalie walked up to both of them.

"Good luck Doc, he's a real hard case."

"See you later, Schanke," Natalie called to him as he went out the door. "We both will," Natalie added.

"Now, Nat, I have all this work, and anyway, pagan ceremonies have never exactly been my cup of tea."

"It's a party, Nick. Fun, music, laughter. Humanity. You had better practice up. When you become fully human again you'll need to know how to act."

"Oh, and dressing up as Mickey Mouse, drinking too much beer and throwing up in the bathroom are going to help me find my true humanity?"

"This party is not going to be like that. Now you told me last week you would come."

"I told you I would think about it."

"Well, think about it while you're getting dressed."

"A costume, Nat? Don't you think I'm a little old for trick or treating?"

"It depends how big your sack is," she responded coquettishly.

"What about last year? There was so much garlic in the air I could hardly stand upright."

"Schanke just thought he was doing me a favor bringing one of his Italian favorites. It really was quite good. But don't worry, I told him that my cousin was going to be there tonight and that she is deathly allergic to garlic. I told him I can't even order it in a restaurant when we go out together. He promised, Nick."

"All right, all right, you've worn down my resistance. I'll come and as a matter of fact, I know exactly what I'll come as. The real me--so to speak."

"Nick, don't you dare."

"Now, Natalie, you've been telling me for weeks that this is a day when adults can act like kids, let their hair down. I'm just taking you up on your offer."

"All right," she said cautiously. "I'll leave it up to your discretion. See you at eight."

The Doctor walked out and Nick found himself following her retreat with his eyes. Funny, he thought, for a moment my thoughts were almost... He turned back to the computer screen and found all words on the screen were shaking as if there was an earthquake, or as if the thing was laughing at him. "Be glad you're not human, either, or you would not find this moment so amusing," he said, reaching out and flicking the power switch.

He left the precinct and drove home thinking the whole way that this really was not a good idea. The desire, the hunger, they were always with him. True, he had centuries of practice in controlling them, but still it was foolish to put himself in a situation where he would be tempted. All right, he decided, I won't go. Nat will understand.

"Yeah, sure, when Schanke joins a gourmet food society," he said out loud.

Entering his sparsely furnished loft, Nick threw his jacket over a chair and went over to the even more sparsely filled refrigerator. He took out one of the bottles and poured himself a glass of the red liquid that most assumed was wine. With Nat's help he had cut back, but he had not stopped completely. Old habits are hard to break, he had told her.

Schanke often kidded him about having no food in the fridge. Nick always told him it was part of the bachelor life.

Flopping down on the sofa, Nick closed his eyes and rolled his head. Even though he had only just risen from his sleep a few hours before, Nick felt tired. Maybe I am getting more human after all, he thought. He turned back to the mail that he had thrown on the table when he came in.

A garishly colored flyer from the Toronto Theater Company caught his eye. It announced that they would be doing some old stand-bys and a few new works this season. The opening nights of the latter to be attended by the authors.

He did on occasion go to the theater. He, after all, had plenty of time. Nick did not think his schedule permitted him, however, to go see "Dracula, the Musical."

Reading the bios of the playwrights who would be in attendance, he noticed that he actually had met one of them. That was a long time ago. Then she was a young writer who the critics said held much promise.

Now, years later, that promise had been fulfilled and she was well-known and had seen much success. From the picture in the brochure Nick could tell that the years had been kind to her, but time had stood still for him. He would not be going to this production.

The world truly was becoming a smaller place. This was not a comforting thought to Nick. "Science may yet reveal us to the mortal world," Jeanette had said to him, and he knew that she was right.

The rest of the mail was the usual collection of ads. Junk mail, he mused, it follows you to the grave, and beyond. He smiled.

Well, I guess I can't put off the inevitable. He unzipped the garment bag that covered the costume he had picked out the week before. I did promise Nat and she is a good friend, he thought. Eyeing the sleek black get up brought a smile to his face. You asked for it, Doctor, he thought.

Pulling up in front of Natalie's building, he did not need his superior hearing to know that the party was in full swing. Standing on the sidewalk looking up at the windows of Natalie's apartment he could see that they were wide open and laughter was spilling out.

He was nearly bowled over by a woman carrying a large bag. She had come out of one of those stores that catered to that collectible stuff. Nick never understood the desire to collect "things." This was lucky,he mused, for he would have collected quite a bit over seven centuries.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, How appalling." the woman said. Nick bent to help her pick up the things that had dropped out of the bag and was helped by one of Nat's coworkers who had been heading for the party.

Nick noticed that the man was dressed in the U. S. civil war uniform that he painstakingly had put together to participate in one of the many reenactments that had become so popular. When the woman went on her way both of the men walked into the lobby of Nat's apartment. Nick stood at the elevator. The other man headed for the steps.

He paused at the door and turned to Nick, "Got to stay in character you know. No elevators at Vicksburg," and went on his way. Nick considered, and then dismissed the idea, of pointing out that there were few Volkswagen beetles there, either, but that did not stop the pseudo soldier from driving up in one.

The true meaning of the phrase most attributed to P.T. Barnum "children of all ages" was never clearer to him. He smiled and stepped into the elevator.

Maybe this evening wouldn't be so bad, after all,There was no garlic so far, he thought, just bad aftershave. At least I'm not allergic to that or I couldn't come within three blocks of Schanke. He got off the elevator at Nat's floor and was walking toward the door when a shriek escaped from the stairwell door at the other end of the hall.

"Help me," a female voice rang out. Nick drew his gun and ran down the hall just as a slender female dressed in a torn white gown fell through the door followed by a large hairy beast.

Seeing Nick the beast spoke. "Hey don't shoot I'm not a real monster." Nick noticed for the first time that the man was wearing a werewolf costume.

"He just plays one on television," the woman chimed in smiling all the while.

Feeling very silly, Nick said putting his gun back in its holster, "Uh, this is just part of my costume. Nice fur."

"Thanks. It really itches though."

"And you should have seen how the puppies acted when they saw their daddy. I don't know how we'll ever get either of them out from under the bed."

"I can imagine."

"Well got to run," the man said.

The woman ran toward Nat's apartment door and resumed her screaming. This time accompanied by the man's growling and clawing at the door.

A figure opened the door and a familiar voice called out. "Nat, did you invite the road company of Beauty and the Beast?"

The man growled, picked up the woman and rushed past the grinning detective. Schanke peered down the hall and saw Nick. Knight's mouth dropped open. "Schanke, I never knew."

"Good evening," Schanke said effecting that bad accent generations of movie goers have associated with a certain Transylvanian Count. "I want to drink your blood," he continued.

"Sorry, don't have any on me," Nick said.

"Damn it, you have no idea how hard it is to talk with these things in," Schanke said as he took out his plastic fangs.

Looking at Schanke Nick saw the white pasty face, cherry red lips and greased back black wig. God, Nick thought, I never looked this bad on my worst day, literally.

"Great costume, huh? My wife made the cape. Wonderful woman. You should see what she did for the kids with just some paper bags and a little construction paper."

"I can imagine," Nick murmured.

"Nat told you to dress up -- not 'dress up'. Who are you supposed to be, anyway?"

"I, uh, I'm Bond, James Bond," Nick told him.

Looking Knight over from top to bottom, resplendent in his tux, cummerbund, tie and white ruffled shirt, Schanke's only response was, "Sure."

Walking up to Knight he pulled at his bow tie. He was surprised when it came untied. "Geez, I'm sorry. I thought it was a clip on. I never knew anyone who could actually tie one of those things."

Nick retied the tie and said, "I've had lots of practice. Shall we get on with the party?"

"Oh yeah, Nat really looks hot." Seeing Nick's disapproving look, he added, "Hey, I'm married, not dead okay?" Considering his current attire this last remark made Nick smile.

"The food's over there. There's ice in the kitchen, beer in the fridge and blood punch," these last words accentuated with the phony accent again, "on the dining room table. It looks gross but it has the kick of a Transylvanian mule."

"I didn't know Transylvania was known for its mules." Nick commented.

"Whatever," Schanke said and moved off into the crowd, putting his fangs back in and attempting to bite Evelyn from accounting in the neck. Even though she was dressed as a little devil, Nick could tell she was not amused by Schanke's actions. His feeling was confirmed when Schanke's fangs went flying across the room, luckily without Schanke attached.

Entering the apartment, Nick was hit by sensory overload. The music, the smells, the sights.

The police department and the coroner's office were well represented. He knew most of the people there. It was not necessary for him to see their faces, which was lucky since most of their faces were obscured by some kind of mask.

If the centuries had taught him one thing it was to be an observer. All he had to do was catch a glimpse of a person's walk, the way they held themselves when they were standing talking, the way they held their heads when they thought no one was looking. Body language was its own signature.

"Well look at you," Nick turned and saw Nat. More of Nat than he normally saw for sure. "You're drooling and I just had the carpets cleaned," she said.

"I'd say you were a heart-stopper," he said surreptitiously, "but that would be a bit pointless."

Natalie was dressed in a sleek, low cut, black gown. A jet black wig was in place of her normal brown locks. "I thought this would be to your," she hesitated, "taste."

"I thought you were trying to wean me away from such bad habits," he replied.

"Maybe later, I have guests now." She turned and walked away leaving Nick wondering two things. How strong <u>was</u> that punch and could he get more.

Nick wondered around the room making small talk, looking at the variety of costumes, and occasionally joining in on deep conversations such as the one being conducted by the chief of the Research Department on whether General Ulysses S. Grant would have had as much success as a military leader if he had used his real first name of "Hiram."

When a woman came by dressed like Elvis and asked if he knew whether there were any donuts left, he wondered briefly if anyone in this crowd would notice if he walked out onto the fire escape and just kept on walking.

Dismissing this thought, at least for the moment, he finally moved to one corner of the room and found a new way to pass the time.

Scanning someone's bookshelves can be very revealing and Nick thought Nat was revealing quite a lot as he viewed the many romance novels on her shelves.

"What are you doing?" Nat called to Nick.

Funny, he thought I didn't even sense her approach. I suppose I am getting used to her and don't fear her. Mistake, Nick, mistake. You haven't survived all these years by letting your guard down, he thought.

"I was just reviewing your collection of great works of modern literature. This one for instance," Nick picked one of the books off the shelf. "A classic in romance literature," he quoted from the book cover. "That's damning with faint praise, isn't it, Nat?" He continued, "You actually read this stuff?"

"Do I comment on your lifestyle?"

"Constantly." Seeing that he had her goat he continued. "Just look at this cover art. Do you think some guy actually posed for

this? Look at the way his hair is blowing, there's a breeze, he's wearing only that long towel. He could have caught his death."

"So could you," Nat said advancing on him menacingly. "Right now."

"Nat, Nat, Nat. Don't be so touchy. I think this could bring us closer together. Where can I get the collected works of," he looked for the author's name on the cover, "Susan A..."

Before he could finish Natalie had snatched the book from his hand and smacked his arm with it.

"If I didn't know better I'd say you were drunk, but as we both know, that is not possible. I want you to go play with the rest of the children and leave my things alone."

"Oh, Natalie, I love it when you're strict."

She was about to respond when it occurred to her that he was just doing this to get even with her for forcing him to come to the party in the first place.

"Hey, Doc, we're out of dip." Saved by Schanke, she thought, taking the dish from his hands and heading for the kitchen.

"What?" he said as he noticed Knight's look.

Luckily for all concerned both men's beepers went off simultaneously. Schanke indicated that he would make the call. Nick, of course, did not need to be standing next to Schanke to hear both sides of the conversation nor did he have to wait for Schanke to relay the conversation to know what had occurred. However, he went across the room to the phone and patiently waited as Schanke informed him about the call. Both men gave their regrets to Natalie and then slipped away from the party and headed for Nick's car.

"Considering we're back on duty, don't you think it would be a good idea if maybe you removed some of that make up?" Nick asked.

"Hey, it Halloween, and anyway the dead don't have any feelings," Schanke responded.

Nick restrained himself admirably.

They arrived at the crime scene. The cold night air, the sound of the water gently crashing against the wall built to keep it away from the hotel that sat on the water's edge, the smell of blood. Nick had come upon this type of scene many times, not all of them recent or in the guise of a police officer.

A young officer greeted them, "Good evening." The phony accent was everywhere, Nick thought.

"A little respect for the dead, officer," Schanke responded as he pushed past the officer and went over to the body.

"Is he kidding?" The officer noticed that Nick was looking over at him. "Um, I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by it. It's just well, um..."

Nick decided to let the young man off the hook. "Don't worry, Schanke brings out the worst in a lot of people."

"Thanks, Detective."

"Call me Nick. What happened here?"

"Nothing unusual, unfortunately. Looks like a mugging that went bad. Two young people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mugger comes up and that's all she wrote."

"<u>Two</u> young people?"

"Yeah, the guy was with a girl. She's over there,pretty upset. We tried to question her but she wouldn't answer. We thought we would just let her sit for a while."

Before the Officer could finish his sentence Nick had gone over to the shivering woman. She was sitting on a low wall and looking out on the dark water but seeing nothing. Nick took off his coat and wrapped it around her. He then sat next to her.

"I'm Detective Knight. Nick. Can I get you anything?"

The woman stirred and looked into his eyes. There was something vaguely familiar. The pain perhaps, he had seen this look many times, after all.

"Pourquoi?" Why, she asked him and began to cry uncontrollably as she fell into his arms. Nick began to comfort her using the present day version of the language of his youth. This appeared to calm her a bit although she did not release her grip.

"I always knew you had it in you to be a real lady killer, Knight." Schanke always came up with the most inappropriate thing to say, Nick thought.

"She couldn't give a statement because she doesn't speak English," Nick informed him.

"Poor kid," Schanke said.

"What did you find out?" Nick questioned.

"Looks pretty straightforward. His pockets are turned out, so he was mugged. There are some cuts and bruises so he struggled. There is a large hole through his body so he died. Did you get anything from the girl?"

"Not yet. I'll wait with her for a while and then bring her into the station. Why don't you hitch a ride with one of the patrol cars?"

"Okay," he responded and left.

Nick sat with the girl for a long time, his arm around her, gently rocking back and forth to try to calm her. He could tell that even though she appeared at rest she was not. Her heart was beating erratically. It was not easy for him to stay here. The smell of blood was strong even though the body had been removed. But she needed him and he would stay. He understood panic and fear all too well. He had seen it often in others and sometimes in himself.

Nick wondered if Merlin had entered the fact that he spoke fluent French into the personnel records he had created for him. He would have to check this out.

The girl finally calmed down enough to give her name, Patrice Jacquil. The bits of story she told made it seem real Romeo and Juliet stuff. She and her boyfriend, Etienne, planned to marry but her father, a wealthy aristocrat, would have none of it. The boy was unacceptable. He did not come from the right family. He had no money or position. He was not "perfect." "Perfect" was the only quality her father would accept in a future husband for his only child. She, after all, would inherit much.

The two young lovers had left France and come to Toronto on a whim. It had been the destination of the next plane out of the airport. They had been there barely a week. Tonight they had decided to go for a walk along the lake front when a man accosted

them. At first he did not brandish a weapon, merely speaking in a loud voice.

Etienne had pushed past the man. Patrice looked on in horror as the man pulled out a gun and pointed it at her love. They had struggled. Words were exchanged, neither understanding the other. Then the gunshot that all understood too well. The man had taken her purse and turned out Etienne's pockets before running into the night.

This last revelation brought another torrent of tears. What would happen now? Where would she go? The questions came between the sobs.

"We'll get in touch with your family." Nick had reassured her, but she only laughed hysterically and told him that he did not understand. Her father believed she had disgraced her family and he would never forgive her. She began to laugh again and cry at the same time.

Nick could hear not only her laughter but laughter that crossed the centuries.

Funny, he thought, La Croix is dead and still I so frequently hear him mocking me. Nick remembered a time less than a year after La Croix had brought him over. It seemed that he had been on a long drunk. The desire for blood, for the emotion that a death cry brings forth, had been too strong for him to resist.

He now knew that the desires could be controlled. La Croix could have saved him much pain but he enjoyed seeing the noble Knight brought down. "You are like me now Nicholas." He had said. "We will hunt for centuries, take what we want. The killing will be glorious."

Jeanette had come up behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest, seemingly reinforcing La Croix's words. "We take what we want."

He then knew he had been used. By La Croix, who reveled in Nick's degradation. By Jeanette, who wanted a young lover who would be with her throughout time.

He had fled the public house where they had been staying. Nick had timed his escape, for that was what it was, perfectly. He had just enough time to reach his destination before sunrise and he knew that while La Croix would surely follow he would not do so this morning.

"My god, Nicholas, you are alive!" Andre's words had rung in his ears as he returned his embrace. "The others did not know what had become of you. We thought the worst. Oh, Nicholas, you have come home."

Home, Nick thought. Yes, I am home and the nightmare has ended.

Today, sitting on the hotel steps with this young girl, Nicholas realized he was naive then and perhaps he was naive now.

He laughed and the girl looked up at him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was thinking about my own father. Birds of a feather."

"Is you father still alive?" she asked.

"No he died ..... many years ago."

But that doesn't lessen his power, Nick thought. But then there was no time for such morbid thoughts now.

"Come on, let me take you to the station. You can give your statement to the officers there."

"Don't leave me," she said.

"I won't be far."

They drove to the station in silence. Nick advised the desk sergent about the language problem and he waited until a female officer came up, addressing Patrice in French and saying that she would take her statement. Nick used the opportunity to slip away to check the morgue.

It had been a quiet night and the sole remaining coroner's assistant on duty was already hard at work.

"Hey, Knight, nice outfit. Why aren't you at Nat's party? Aren't there other homicide detectives?"

"None like me," Nick responded.

"Oh yeah, you mean ones who can put up with Schanke."

"He was here?"

"The Count? One more blood bank joke and I would have stuffed him in one of the drawers."

"Have you got anything to go on?"

"Next to nothing. Single shot causing massive trauma. Death almost instantaneous. I know it sounds trite, but he wouldn't have had time to suffer."

"Okay," Nick said. "If anything turns up let me know."

He returned to his office and found Schanke, still dressed like the Count saying, "Come on, come on," to the exact same computer terminal Nick had the run in with earlier in the evening. Finally Schanke slapped the side of the computer in frustration.

"Having a little trouble, Schanke? I thought you rated expert on this."

"Cute, Knight. You'd think these things would be more user friendly to friendly users."

"That girl is waiting for you up front. Says she doesn't want to go back to the hotel. Seems her purse had her room key in it."

"Maybe I can do something for her."

"Is the Father Knight refuge for abandoned waifs going to put her up?"

"You have a dirty mind, Schanke. I was thinking more like calling Natalie."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled." He said looking at his watch.

Nick collected the girl from the front desk and told her that she could stay with a friend of his. He neglected to tell her that Natalie was a doctor, although he had thought that this could prove helpful.

On the way to Natalie's, Nick stopped at the Raven. Strange, he thought, I tell Jeanette over and over again that I do not wish the way of life (or death) that she has chosen, but I find myself returning to her. Tonight, though, he had a reason for being here.

Jeanette had been a good source of information for him many times. Those she protected traveled in the shadows and those shadows often spoke of the grittier goings on in the City. He told Patrice to wait in the car and he would return shortly. She had been through enough for one night.

The place was dark, as usual, and Nick moved through the gyrating dancers. He could tell that there were a number of

mortals here tonight. Looking for a little taste of danger. They did not know how dangerous being here was.

He saw Jeanette sitting at a table behind a curtain made of metal chains. If Jeanette actually was the age she looked, the young man with her would have been her contemporary. He, of course, was far from it. Nick noticed that her companion had rather a glassy eyed stare.

"Serving liquor to minors again, Jeanette?" Nick called out to her. The young man, the trance broken, stood up and was about to defend the fair lady's honor when Nick flashed his badge. With his ego deflated, the man moved away.

"Nicholas, why did you do that?"

"I thought your rules prohibited any social contact with the red blooded patrons?"

"Killing, Nicholas, killing. The rules say nothing about a slight diversion, a snack if you wish. Besides, a girl likes to hear certain things. Even if she literally puts those words in her suitors mouth."

"Help me with this case and I'm sure I can keep you diverted."

"What would dear Natalie say?"

Nicholas reflected on the two most important women in his life at this time. So different, but so alike.

His feelings for Jeanette had changed drastically over the years. At first he despised her. She, after all, had been the tool La Croix had used to bring him over. Once he had resigned himself to his condition they had become lovers. He had thought he would never love again, but she had taught him that the passion was not only in the kill.

He then had recreated himself and decided to try to help those in the mortal world. She had laughed at him. He was what he was and he could never be mortal again. But she had helped him in many ways.

Natalie was different. If Jeanette was the dark side of the world, Natalie was the light. She was truly human. She thought she understood. Nick's problem, after all, was just a medical one. Her innocence on this and many other subjects was perhaps the most appealing quality to Nick. Maybe she would be the one whose love would bring him over.

Looking over at Nick, Jeanette had to admit that she still loved the young Knight. His innocence, his searching, his refusal to give up hope. These qualities had become appealing to her. So many many of those who shared eternal life went through the motions of living but they were dead inside in more ways than one.

She loved Nicholas. So much so that when she saw him lost in despair, she turned to two mortals. She had called Schanke to the Raven after she had tried and failed to reach Natalie when Nick was on the edge. In past lives she had killed those who had caught Nick's eye, but strangely enough she saw some of her own feelings in Natalie. This, of course, did not mean that she could not change her mind at any time. When she was alone she had often smiled over the prospect of this.

"Nicholas, if you are going to daydream, please do so elsewhere." Jeanette said, clearly disturbed.

"Sorry. I have a drawing here. A street punk who tonight became a killer. Get the others to ask around to see if anyone is bragging of a kill." Jeanette took the picture but did not have the opportunity to look at it before being interrupted by the call of a rather disturbed woman.

"Nicholas! I saw him. The man outside. He saw me."

Nick was out the door in seconds. He looked up and down the street but heard not a heart beat.

He returned to the table and found Jeanette with her arm around the sobbing girl speaking to her in the French she knew so well.

Turning to Nicholas she spoke in English however. "Well what do we have here. A taste of home?"

"She is nothing to me Jeanette. Just a scared kid who saw someone she loved die tonight."

Jeanette got up from the table and placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. As she spoke she moved around behind her and traced a line across the girl's fragile neck from one shoulder to the other. "Remember Nicholas, too many entanglements are not good. She looks a lot like you. Perhaps it is her innocence."

Nick did not respond. Jeanette was very intuitive. She clearly had drawn the same conclusion he had.

Nick took the girl's hand and they moved toward the door. He told Jeanette that he would be taking the girl to Natalie's.

"Nicholas," Jeanette called after them, "Come back when you are off duty and wear the suit, at least at first." He desperately wanted to be human again, but he had to admit to himself that he found it hard to leave Jeanette this night.

He proceeded Patrice out onto the street but found that nothing had changed. They drove off towards Natalie's. Neither saw the figure of the man who came out from the shadows and smiled.

Pulling up in front of Natalie's now quiet building, Nick realized that he had forgotten to call her. He knew she would not care. Even after all these years of living, Nick was to be reminded that he was not always right.

"Nick, it's the middle of the night. I know that this doesn't matter to you, but on my rare evening off I would like to sleep."

Looking past Nick, Natalie saw Patrice and halted her tirade. "Nick?"

"This is Patrice. She doesn't speak English, only French. She has had a rather hard night, I was hoping that she could stay here for awhile. It is your weekend off and all."

Giving Nick a look that could kill if that was not redundant, Nick was surprised when Natalie began speaking to Patrice in French. She ushered both into her apartment.

"Why Natalie, I never knew."

"You don't know everything about me, Nick. I have my surprises too."

"Don't we all," a voice from the corridor called out and pushed open the door that was almost closed.

All heads turned toward the new arrival. Jeanette projected her usual fragile beauty that hid a far from fragile interior.

Standing in her nightgown, Natalie said aloud, but as much to herself as to anyone present, "I thought the party was over hours ago."

"If you expect a long term relationship with Nicholas," Jeanette said, making his name sound so very French, "you will have to get used to the night shift."

Before Natalie could respond, Jeanette said to Nick, "I need to talk to you. Now."

Natalie was more than a little upset, and Jeanette more than a little amused. She pulled him into Natalie's bedroom to speak to him.

"Nick, it appears one of our friends has been naughty."

"Meaning?"

"I found this in the private area of the club." Jeanette pulled a wallet from her purse. Looking at the identification in it, Nick saw that it belonged to Patrice's fiance.

"Who did it?"

"I don't know, yet, but I will. In the meantime, watch the girl. I do not know if the guilty party is one of us or one of the mortals who is drawn to the Club. But if someone has broken our code, there are no rules."

"For any of us," Nick responded.

"Oh, Nicholas, I love to see you and this way. So feral." Jeanette said, moving closer to him and casting a most interesting shadow on the curtain between the bedroom and the rest of the living space.

Looking down into her eyes, he knew why he had first loved her, he could feel her body against his, she dropped her chin to his chest, her hair gently caressing his chin. He put his arms around her, and for a moment there was no one there but the two of them. But only for a moment.

"Nick, I am not running a hotel here."

Hesitating a moment, Nick responded, "Huh? Oh, Patrice will only be here for a few days. I promise. She just needs a safe place to stay. Now more than ever."

"Meaning?" Natalie asked.

"Meaning we need to get out on the streets and use the last few hours of darkness." Literally dragging Jeanette out the door with him, the two left, leaving Natalie with a very confused Patrice. Natalie had already got the basics of the story from her, she knew that it would be a long night for them all.

Down on the street, Nick stopped to talk to Jeanette. "I can't believe one of us would be involved in something as messy as this. It has to be a mere coincidence that this murderer has chosen to use the Club. Besides, you keep better track of the converts than this."

"I hope you are right about our prey being a mortal, but I am not a baby-sitter, dear Nicholas. The converts know if they play by the rules I will help them as will others of our kind, and if they don't....." Nick could have sworn that she shivered. He knew what she feared. Neither wanted this to go any further.

"I suppose we should be glad that you are a policeman. Au revoir, dear one, I will return to the Club to take attendance and

perhaps conduct my own interrogations." She was gone in the blink of an eye.

Nick had tried hard to keep his two worlds from meeting. Tonight they had collided. He knew whatever happened, it could be the end. Of what he was not sure, but he felt the loneliness that had followed him throughout the centuries.

"Nicholas, you have come home!" Hearing his brother Andre's words he broke down, but found that even tears eluded him. "Where have you been?"

"I was wounded, left on the battlefield. By the time I awakened, the battle was over. One of those pillaging the corpses saw that I was not yet dead and took pity on me. Through his aid I regained my strength, but it took a long time. I was mad with fever for so long. But I <u>am</u> back now and everything is all right."

"Nicholas." He froze in his tracks at the mention of his name. This meeting he had wanted, but feared most of all.

"He is back, father," his brother had called out.

"Do not waste my time stating the obvious. Much has happened in the past year, Nicholas. We have been favored by the Monarch. Our name will live through the generations. We will never die." With this pronouncement, Nicholas' father had left the room.

"I am glad to see you, too, father," Nicholas had said quietly, mostly to himself.

"He is glad to see you, Nicholas. He was very worried," his brother told him.

"Worried about me, or about his hopes for an heir, for another generation?"

Nick's thoughts were disturbed when he heard the call on the radio in his car state a familiar address.

Nick answered the call and was there far quicker than he could have arrived had he driven. Fearing the worst, he entered the Raven for the second time that night. Schanke and a few of the uniforms were already there milling about.

Nick was relieved to see Jeanette, obviously upset, but still very much in control. "Why would I know anything about a murder that took place so far from here? No, I did not know the victim. No, I did not know the witness. No, I do not have any precious evidence. Who told you such lies?"

"Schanke." Nick called out to his partner.

"Knight, what are you doing here?"

"I heard the call and wondered what was going on."

"We got an anonymous tip on our murder earlier this evening. Seems someone said they saw a man who matched the description of the drawing come here. Said that he talked to Jeanette. Gave her the missing wallet and then left. Maybe your friend is doing a little fencing on the side. A credit card scam perhaps. Roll the tourists?"

While he was saying this, Nick could see Jeanette's face over Schanke's shoulder. He knew that the centuries had given her much control. She was using every bit of it now.

"You really believe that, Schank?"

"Between you and me? No way."

Nick knew that Schanke would not find the wallet, for it was currently resting quite comfortably in his inside jacket pocket.

"Detective Schanke, over here," one of the uniformed officers called out.

Over here was the back room that was reserved for certain special customers. "We found it sitting right here." Schanke picked up a passport and opened it, careful not to smudge any possible prints.

"I do not know how that got here," Jeanette protested, and looked at Nick.

She moved close to him and for his ears only said, "That was not there when I left."

Nick believed her for many reasons. One was that Jeanette was very thorough. She had to be or she would not have survived the years.

"Detective Schanke, I cannot be responsible for every client who comes into my club."

"I know, but I do think that you will have to come down to the station so we can get a statement."

"I don't think we need to bother with that, Schank. I'll talk to Jeanette. I'll even do the follow-up paperwork."

"Nick, I know how you feel about her. Hell, she saved my bacon when that nut was on my tail but she is the only connection we have to the crime. I don't see how we can..."

"I'll talk to Jeanette. You need not bother." Nick said these words slowly and precisely, staring into Schanke's unblinking eyes.

One of the uniforms came over and asked Schanke if he should take Jeanette in. "You need not bother," he said flatly, and they headed for the door.

"The force works on weak minds." Jeanette said quietly to Nick. He smiled. Even in times such as these her humor was present. Jeanette's tone, however turned quickly from humor to deadly serious, with the accent on the deadly.

"What is going on here, Nicholas? I do not like being played for a fool."

"Did you get a chance to ask around?"

"No. The police were here when I arrived. It could easily have become a blood bath. I had put out the word before I left that all our local friends were to meet me here due to a matter that was most urgent. Some of the young ones do not have our control, Nicholas. Your friend does not know how close he came to his own version of eternity."

"I don't like this any more than you, Jeanette. Someone is playing a very dangerous game and we must put a stop to it."

"Or we could always just leave. Flee. We have done it before."

This triggered an old memory for Nick.

"What have you become, Nicholas? Your pallor, your refusal to join us for meals, your refusing to go out in the sunlight. All these things, I thought were due to your wounds but this ...."

His father's words burned in his mind. He had caught Nicholas draining the life sustaining blood from one of the estate's wild beasts.

"Father, I am no different. I have an illness but it can be controlled. I know that now. I am still your son." Moving toward

his father, he was shocked at the revulsion he saw in the man's eyes.

"You are not my son. You are evil. I will not allow you to destroy this family. I cannot bring myself to destroy you but I will not give sanctuary to a child of the devil. My son died courageously in battle. I never wish to see you again."

Those were the last words he ever heard his father say. His brother Andre came in and heard enough of the conversation to know what Nicholas had become. Many times over the years he had considered ending his existence, but he never came as close as he did that night. His father had stalked away from him, and his brother, clearly confused, turned and followed him. He did not call out after him nor try to contact either again.

He had returned to the grounds once after both were dead and was touched to see that a memorial marker had been set out in the family burial ground near the house. It stood away from the family marker and from the age of the stone Nicholas could tell that it had been erected during the time his brother ruled as Lord of the manor.

Nicholas had been driven off again, this time at his own choosing, when he saw a man and woman walking toward the markers. He could see in the faces of the children who accompanied them that they belonged here. He no longer did.

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"No, Jeanette. We are not running. We are hunters. Let us hunt."

"We have also been killers, dear Nicholas."

"So be it." Nick turned and walked out the door. Jeanette drew back. She loved him like this. She wanted him to accept what he was and be willing to use his powers to the fullest. But it also frightened her, for this was not how Nicholas truly wanted to spend his existence. She knew he hated himself when he was like this, and she also knew what that hate could bring one of their kind to do.

Jeanette forced her thoughts to other more pressing problems. After living for almost eight centuries she was sure Nick could live through a blue funk. Yes, of course he could, she thought as she moved among the patrons.

Nick returned to the precinct more from habit than from the belief that an answer would be found here. This was almost like a practical joke. True, a deadly practical joke, but a practical joke just the same. Almost as bizarre as one that La Croix would dream up, but of course that was not possible. Nick, after all, had personally dispatched La Croix to what ever fate awaits them all personally.

When Nick slept, the thoughts that ran through his mind could not actually be called dreams, they surely were not what he remembered of dreaming. Nick knew however that he replayed that night in his mind over and over. He would never forget.

Schanke informed Nick that the investigation was at a dead end. Nick hoped that this remark was not prophetic. He was not encouraged when Jeanette called and told him that her "friends"

had not been much help, although she had the feeling that some were not revealing all that they knew. They seemed almost afraid. But she was not sure of what.

"Perhaps I should have a word with them." Nick said.

"I thought you would feel that, way so I have selected a likely candidate for you."

"Who?"

"Peter." Nick knew this convert to be in appearance a boy just out of his teen years although he was actually almost two hundred years old. A "boy" still, thought Nicholas, at least as far as he was concerned.

After questioning Jeanette further regarding Peter, he asked her, "Won't he be suspicious?"

"Nicholas, you doubt I know how to deceive a man?"

Letting that remark pass, Nick asked for Peter's location. "He is currently enjoying the 'pleasures' of our 'game room'."

"I'll be there."

Nick arrived soon thereafter and without addressing anyone, not even Jeanette, he went through the Club and into the back room. Everyone there knew better than to try and stop him.

He found Peter and one of the younger female converts enjoying each other in the only way that this cursed existence allowed them to.

"Don't strain yourself." Nick called out to Peter. The girl looked shocked and attempted to pull her dress back over her body and move away from Peter. He held her firm.

"I just love the new ones, so innocent, so sweet, so full of surprises. I could go on with her for hours. Of course, someone as old as you may find it harder to enjoy such pleasure. Do you want to watch? Or maybe you'd like to participate?"

The girl used the distraction that this verbal exchange caused to pull away and head for the door. She was new, Nick thought. She was almost blushing. Nick knew that it was not long after the transformation that bodily concerns and vanities fled.

"No, I think you and I need a little time together alone to talk."

"That's no fun," Peter said as he got up, straightened himself out and tried to go after the girl. He found, however, that Nick did not have this in mind.

"I think I can make this alot more fun, as matter of fact more fun than you can imagine."

Nick said these words with a smile on his face, a gleam in his eye, his fangs bared, and his fingers like steel talons closing around the boy's upper arm.

"Hey, man, I've never done anything to you. I don't want to fight," Peter said momentarily losing the bravado he had shown before. But only momentarily, for in the next second he said, "And you don't want to fight me, either. I know about you. You don't kill anymore, you don't feed any more. You're weak. I'm strong. I could take you."

Having shown far more restraint than Nick thought appropriate in the situation, he literally threw Peter across the room. Nick watched Peter bounce off the far wall. He then flew across the room and grabbed Peter by the throat.

"Really? You really think you can beat me? Weak old me." At these latter words Nick's grip tightened and real fear showed in the boy's eyes.

"Boy, I know tricks you have never even dreamed of. I can cause you more pain than you ever thought possible. You'll think you are mortal again."

"Please, I didn't mean it. Honest. What do you want?"

"Answers." The boy began to squirm, and he was surprised when Nick let him go.

"I've got no answers to give." The fact that he had not yet asked a question told Nick that Peter knew all the answers he needed.

The young man headed for the door, and Nick called out to him. "If you leave now you have no idea the trouble that will be waiting for you."

Peter stopped, "What do you mean?"

"First, you will find that your resting place is no longer very restful. It seems to have acquired a sky light. The morning sun should heat it nicely."

"I have more than one resting place."

"Of course. Several others have also been redecorated. Some more subtly than others. You will have to wait for the sunrise to fully appreciate the changes." Looking at his watch for effect, Nick continued, "You don't have much time, perhaps you should leave now."

"That bitch Jeanette! I'll get her," Peter said aloud.

"Don't even think about it," Nick said. "Your problems just begin with her. If you leave this room now I'll put the word out that you have turned on your own people. No one will help you. No one will provide a safe place for you. No one will be able to afford to associate with you. You will have eternity to think about your mistake. That is, unless you had more of a part in this murder than I think you did."

The boy, for that is what he appeared to be now, shifted his weight restlessly from one foot to the other.

"If you had anything to do with this murder, or if you did it yourself, you know that I will be gentle compared to other authorities." Nick knew there was no reason to explain further, both knew the code well.

"We kill all the time. What do they care?" The boy did not sound convinced.

"Kill, yes, but set the authorities on one of our own kind? Risk revealing dozens of our people? No, I do not think this is something that could be overlooked for long. In the centuries that I have lived I have come to appreciate a 'safe haven.' Those of you who have lived only in these modern times, you've been protected your whole existence. You have been spared these things. Perhaps we were wrong to do this. Perhaps that is why you are as you are now. Perhaps it is a good thing that this happened."

Nick sighed, "In many ways, after all, you are our children. But there comes a time when children must be freed to make their own mistakes and learn to suffer the consequences of their actions."

Seemingly pondering his own words, Nick continued, "Yes, by all means, go." The boy by now was riveted to his place on the floor and it was clear he was going nowhere.

Nick, however was relentless. This was no game, and he refused to let the boy off the hook so easily. "You will know what it is like to be hunted: the fear, the rage, the uselessness at the end. It will be a valuable lesson for the other young ones. They will watch and learn. After they see what happens to you, I am sure they will find it easier to speak and in the future there will be fewer 'transgressions.' Go. Don't waste my time, or yours. You have so little of it left."

Peter thought of challenging Nick once again, but even as the thought occurred to him Nick said, "Don't think of appealing to my better nature. I admire the mortals and perhaps I do wish to become like them again. But you and I are not mortal now and I will not allow a renegade child to destroy us. Stay or go, but do it now. I have no more time for you."

When he decided to speak, the words came pouring out of Peter's mouth as quickly as he could say them.

"It's only a rumor. You know, something you hear around the Club. I heard the kill was planned."

"Planned?" Nick questioned.

"Yes, supposedly it was all part of a game. The boy wasn't the real target, he was just bait."

"Who told you this?"

"I just heard it around the Club. You know, stories just get started. I heard that there was going to be an even bigger kill soon. Heard it would settle a lot of old scores for a lot of people."

Nick did not like the sound of this. Too often he had heard La Croix speak of the importance of "settling old scores." Strange how he found himself thinking of his old mentor so often these days.

"What else do you know?"

"Nothing, nothing, I swear," the boy stammered.

"Alright, then go."

"Go where?"

"Ask Jeanette. I'm sure she could find somewhere to put you up."

Peter appeared less than enthusiastic, but then his options were limited. He hated to admit any weakness, but he needed the others, and if crawling to Jeanette now helped protect him he could crawl with the best of them. He went out into the club.

Nick smiled one of his few smiles tonight. Poor kid, he doesn't even know what kind of exquisite torture Jeanette can conjure up. He thought he'd give Peter a break, though, and not tell Jeanette about the "bitch" remark.

Walking back out into the main room of the Club he crossed the dance floor and stood at the bar near the door. He could see Jeanette sitting at one of the tables.

A very dejected-looking Peter sat at the table with her. Clearly Jeanette had not lost her touch. Peter rose and skulked away. Jeanette came over to Nick.

"He told me what he told you, for all the good it will do. This is a big city, Nicholas. One or more of our kind has obviously gone bad. The damage they could do before either of us could stop them is incalculable. We should cut our losses and go."

"No," Nick said, "I don't think we could leave this behind. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to get our attention. There's no way they could be sure that I would be assigned to this case, but they knew that involving you and the Club would certainty get me interested. You brought me the only evidence linking you and the Club. Then, mysteriously, more evidence appears so that I cannot easily control the situation."

"If they wanted us dead, dear Nicholas, why go through this elaborate charade? Why put us on guard?"

"The boy was not the target, only the bait. Old scores to be settled. A bigger kill." Nick recited what Peter had told him.

"What does it mean, Nicholas?" Jeanette asked, placing her gloved hand on his arm.

"It means we are being played, played like the strings of a violin. Played by an expert bowman."

"You speak in riddles, Nicholas. The only Maestro we knew is dead. Long dead, and we both know it."

Nick did not hear these last words from Jeanette as he was out the door and on the way to Natalie's in the blink of an eye. As he flew through the night sky, Nick prayed that he was wrong and that he would find Nat and Patrice safe and sound.

Those hopes were quickly dashed. He knew the smell of death was present even before he burst through the window. The total darkness was no impediment to him. For once, he wished it were.

He saw the man instantly, not a ghost, but one of those who worked at the Raven. Max, Jeanette had called him. He seemed to blend in at the Club. Tonight he stood out. Now his eyes almost glowed, his fangs were extended and blood dripped down his face. He was standing over the body of Natalie Lambert, now lying motionless on the floor.

Patrice was curled up in a ball in the corner screaming hysterically. Suddenly the door burst open and Schanke, gun drawn, entered with a uniformed officer. Nick tried frantically to separate the sound of Nat's beating heart from the sound of the others but his mind was filled with so much hate and anger that he could not concentrate.

Max flew toward the window, but Nick was not about to let him go. The struggle seemed to go on forever. Both were strong, inhumanly so and both were ready to kill. But more than hate propelled Nick and this allowed him to gain the upper hand. Tearing the leg from the sofa Nick pressed it against the man's chest. Had Max moved he would have impaled himself.

Schanke finally found a small lamp that had not been broken. In this dim light he could make out Nick and Max's forms but little else other than the piece of wood and Nick's clear intent. "Nick," Schanke said, making his name sound as if it had four syllables. "Why don't you let me handle this. I know how it is when the old adrenalin kicks in, but...."

"Schanke, it's Nat, over there," Nick gestured with his head towards an area of the room that the light did not reach.

"If she's dead, so are you," Nick whispered to the man, pressing the stake into Max's flesh for effect.

"Nick, she's knocked out but she's still breathing." Schanke reported. "Now why don't you let me handcuff this guy and take him down to the station. He's not going anywhere. We had a guard on Nat's door and another one outside. I came by to check on things and when the officer outside tried to reach his partner and got no response we decided to come in. We were halfway up the stairs when we heard the girl scream and heard things breaking." At this point the paramedics arrived and Nick could see that Natalie was coming around.

Schanke gestured toward the dead officer. "Poor guy, never had a chance. Tore him apart bad. This perp has got to be on some pretty potent stuff. Nick, it looks like the door was ripped right off its hinges. Nat must have put up quite a struggle. Must be some wildcat, huh? Almost everything made out of glass is broken. Wouldn't want to have to clean this up. 'Course, I probably wouldn't. You know, my wife says I'm the messiest person on Earth."

Suddenly it occurred to Nick that Schanke was rambling on in the same way that he had done on some occasions, trying to gain time, cool down a situation.

"I'm all right Schank, really. I'll take the guy downstairs and wait for the backup. Let's let the uniforms take this one in."

"Sounds good to me partner, but just to be sure, why don't I walk you both down, you never know when he's going to go off again."

It was around noon before Natalie came out of the drug induced sleep. The sun streaming through the hospital window felt good on her skin. She rolled over and was surprised to see Nick, wrapped in a blanket, huddled on a chair in the darkest corner of the room.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey, yourself," Nick responded. "You gave me quite a scare."

"I scared you? You should have heard my heart pounding when that door flew in." Nat said.

"I wished I could have," Nick told her.

Reaching her hand out to him, she drew back as she realized that if he moved to touch her he would be drawn into the sunlight. He reached for her, however, and held her firm.

"Nick, I..." They moved closer, their lips almost touching.

"Well, I don't think they allow this kind of physical therapy in the hospital."

"Schanke," Nat and Nick said in unison.

"How you feeling, Doc?"

"Better than I did last night. How's Patrice?"

"Fine, can't remember a thing about what happened. Doctor says its amnesia. Says she might never remember."

Natalie looked up at Nick and gave him a knowing smile.

"What happened to the intruder?" Natalie asked.

"He never made it to the station," Schanke responded. "Hell, he never made it to the patrol car. Seems the Feds wanted him. These two guys were waiting for us on the street. Said he belonged

to them. Can you believe it? He kills at least two people that we know of -- oh, Patrice ID'ed him as the one who iced her boyfriend -- and they come in and take him away. He's probably sunning on some beach somewhere."

"It wouldn't surprise me at all, Schank." Nick said.

"Well, I've got to go home and get some sleep. You two ....carry on," Schanke said with a twinkle in his eye as he moved toward the door.

"It wasn't the Feds, was it Nick?" Natalie asked him.

"He got what he deserved. No one will mourn him. Just another punk gone bad. Even our kind can break the rules. He got greedy, wanted more control over the local scene."

"What about Patrice?"

"She'll never remember what happened last night in your apartment."

"We talked a lot last night, Nick. She gave up everything for her fiance and now he's gone. She says her father will never take her back."

"That has been taken care of," Nick responded.

"Don't think I'm going to let you get away with just saying that much," Natalie reproached him.

"I still have some contacts in the old country," Nick said, "let's leave it at that." And Natalie, trusting this man more than she had ever trusted anyone, was willing to.

Nick waited until Natalie drifted back to sleep and he then headed to the underground parking garage and his sleeping place for the day. As night fell he drove to the safe house and picked Patrice up. She had had a nice long talk with her father, who, she said, was far more sympathetic than she had ever dreamed he would be. She would be welcomed home.

On the way to the airport, she asked Nick to stop at the place along the waterfront where her life had taken such a drastic turn a scant few hours before.

She stared out at the water and bid her love adieu. "I owe you so much, Nicholas. You treated me as if we were family."

Nick thought 'We are family, dear Patrice. You look so much like Andre.' What he said, however, was "Think of this as a new beginning." He smiled at her.

She smiled back and moved toward the car. Nick let out a sigh and held back for a moment. He had always wanted to make peace with his brother. Today he had. Nick and Patrice got in the car and drove away, unaware of the eyes that watched them from a loft across the street.

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Speaking to himself, the man whose eyes glowed red said, "Your sentimentality was almost the death of you, dear Nicholas, and it will be yet."

Night Flight
by D. McCrimmon

Heather sighed and blew a strand of hair off her forehead. The plane hadn't even taken off yet, but it already promised to be a long flight. In addition to the Royal Order of Muskrats, San Antonio chapter, there were several groups of rowdy college students on spring break. The routine night flight to Ft. Lauderdale was going to be anything but.

To top it all off, Jaynie had called in sick and her replacement hadn't shown up yet. Biting her lip in frustration, Heather proceeded to load the last of the soda cans in the cart. With this group, the sooner the drink cart began to roll down the aisle, the better.

Hi!" an out-of-breath male voice said behind her. Turning, Heather saw a brunette, green-eyed angel smiling at her. Blinking and shaking her head, she saw a flight uniform and realized he was Jaynie's replacement. As she watched him stow his flight bag, Heather heard him say, "I'm sorry I'm late, the sun wouldn't go down."

Excuse me?" she asked.

The man turned and beamed his angelic smile at her. "I said, I'm sorry I'm late, the traffic was awful in town."

Before Heather could reply, the college students started yelling at each other. With a growl of frustration, she turned to quiet them down. Her partner put a restraining hand on her arm and said, "Let me do the pre-flight safety talk."

He pushed past her and took the microphone off its hook. Launching into the well-worn spiel, he looked back at her and motioned her to her seat. As she sat down, Heather realized the passengers were quieting as they listened to her partner. She found herself relaxing into her seat. She hadn't realized she was so tired. She listened to the smooth masculine voice end the safety spiel.

"...in the event of a drop in cabin pressure, the oxygen masks will drop from the overhead compartment. Place the mask over your nose and mouth, and secure it with the elastic band...Thank you for flying Alliance Airlines...my name is Craig and...you are very sleepy (th-thump, th-thump, th-thump)...you don't want a drink (th-thump, th-thump, th-thump)...you want to sleep until we get to Ft. Lauderdale (th-thump, th-thump, th-thump)...you are very sleepy (th-thump, th-thump, th-thump)...sleep...sleep... sleep..."

Craig smiled to himself as he gently replaced the microphone. Taking a seat next to the gently snoring Heather, his acute hearing picked up the flight crew talking quietly as the plane took off. Looking over the sleeping passengers, Nick thought maybe he should have added a suggestion about how wonderful the flight attendants had been.

On second thought, too many glowing reports would call too much attention to him. And Craig was happy just being a quiet, unassuming night flight attendant--and vampire.

TRAIN OF THOUGHT
By Susan Patric

Matrix sat up in bed, combing his hands through his short-cropped black hair and yawning widely. *God, I love Sundays,* he thought, *especially when I'm not working--and I am <u>not</u> working!* He allowed himself a satisfied grin as he surveyed the results of an elaborate scheme he'd come up with the night before.

Around him was everything he'd need to spend the entire day in bed: enough food for a small army, replete with the four basic food groups--grease, fat, salt and sugar; two jugs of Gatorade, flanked by two equally large bottles of his favorite wine, just in case; a wide variety of reading material, from today's newspaper to the latest issue of Playboy; and, last but not least, a universal remote. His goal for the day was simple: to leave every door unopened.

Matrix knew this was a short-sighted goal. After all, each door he opened put him one step closer to redemption, to ending his visits to The City Inbetween. But everybody deserved a break once in awhile, right? Especially on Sunday.

With that in mind, he propped a pillow against the headboard and sat back, lifting a jug of Gatorade to his lips with one hand and reaching for the sports page with the other. I have it made, he thought smugly. What could go wrong?

Within a few hours, however, he began to see the flaws in his plan. First among them was a killer case of heartburn from too many M&Ms and extra-hot barbecued potato chips. Of course, he'd washed it all down with Gatorade. Which brought him to the second, and far more pressing, problem: the overwhelming need to relieve himself. With a sinking heart, Matrix realized the solution to both problems was just beyond the bathroom door. "Great," he muttered savagely, throwing back the covers. "I'll be caught with my pants down."

He pushed himself off the bed and padded to the bathroom, hoping against hope that maybe the Big Cheese had taken the day off, too. *Fat chance,* he thought, relieved that he hadn't changed out of his blue jeans and favorite t-shirt before going to bed. He grabbed the bathroom doorknob. *I'd better be ready for anything,* he decided, gritting his teeth.

Matrix opened the door and stepped inside--a bathroom. The only trouble was, it wasn't <u>his</u> bathroom. Worse, this one seemed to be moving. He tamped down the now-familiar edge of panic long enough to take care of business, thankful that there wasn't room for his "guide" to stand in there with him. That pesky personage would be along soon enough.

He stepped out of the tiny cubicle into a narrow passageway and felt the floor vibrating beneath his feet. *I'm on a train,* he thought. *What am I doing on a train?*

"Pardon me, Mr. Matrix, but you look a bit lost," said a voice from behind him.

Matrix whirled around to see a wiry man of about 75 whose alert blue eyes regarded him from under the rim of a porter's cap. "How did you know my name?" Matrix demanded.

The man only smiled.

"Okay, dumb question," Matrix admitted gruffly. "Answer this then: What am I doing here?"

"You should know--you bought yourself the ticket."

Matrix cursed himself for expecting a straight answer. "Let's try something easier," he said with exaggerated patience. What are you doing here?"

"Why, I'm Charlie," he replied, as if that explained everything. When Matrix only stared at him dumbly, he added, "I'm here to take care of you and your friends, Mr. Matrix," he said with a cheerful smile.

"My...friends?" Matrix repeated, his gut twisting.

"Of course, sir. No one should make this trip alone."

"What trip?" Matrix bellowed, his face just inches from the older man's.

Charlie took a hasty step backward. "Maybe you'll feel better when you've had a drink," he stammered, looking for a moment as if he thought Matrix would strangle him. When Matrix made no move, Charlie continued, "You know, something to wet your whistle, calm your nerves." He gave Matrix a hopeful smile. "Why don't you follow me to the dining car? That's where the other passengers are."

Matrix threw up his hands in disgust, and motioned for Charlie to lead the way.

As he followed the older man through a labyrinth of passageways, it occurred to Matrix that this was no ordinary train. They had walked for what seemed like hours and had yet to pass through any passenger cars. *No wonder they're all in the dining car*, he thought wryly. *There's nowhere else to go.* He was about to ask Charlie if they were lost when the smell of hard liquor and stale cigarette smoke filled his nostrils.

"We're almost there, sir," Charlie shouted over the chorus of a drinking song as tuneless as it was obscene.

"I noticed," Matrix shouted back, following Charlie around the next corner.

Charlie reached the door first, and turned to Matrix. "Here we are, sir," he said, his voice tinged with what sounded like regret. "Good luck."

He started to move away, but Matrix caught his arm. "What do you mean, 'Good luck'?" he asked sharply, the knot in his stomach tightening further despite his effort to stay calm. He took a deep breath and softened his tone. "Aren't you going to join me? Introduce me to my fellow travellers?" he asked.

"Sorry, Mr. Matrix, I'm on duty," Charlie answered apologetically. "But you should see some familiar faces."

That piece of information did little to improve Matrix' mood, and he eyed the door with misgiving. *Best find out all I can before I take the plunge*, he decided. But when he turned back, Charlie was gone. "Typical," Matrix muttered, wrenching the door open.

The air was blue with smoke so dense it made his eyes water, and it took a moment for Matrix to get his bearings. He didn't know what he had expected, but this wasn't it. This was just another hole-in-the-wall bar, with cheap fixtures and fraying red

carpet so dirty it looked almost gray. Who could be worth saving in here?

He didn't have much time to ponder the question before someone came up behind him and gave him a hearty slap on the back. "Hey, Matrix!" the man said in a voice so loud Matrix wondered whether he was drunk or deaf. "I wondered when you'd get here!"

Matrix tried to move away, but the man had thrown his arm around him and was leaning heavily. "Whatsa matter, buddy?" he whined, "you don't remember your old pal, Johnny? The man who set your career in motion?"

Something in his voice made Matrix turn to look at him. His eyes widened in shock as he recognized Johnny Glover, the small-time hood who had unwittingly robbed and murdered one of the Family. The first man Matrix had killed for hire. "Johnny," he breathed, "What are you doing here?"

"Ya'didn't think I'd miss your party, did ya?" he scoffed. "You're the best hitman I know!" His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper and he winked a bleary eye. "'Course, yer also the only hitman I know, so I had to take some of your other buddies' word for it." He turned toward the crowd. "Look, fellas, it's Matrix!"

Matrix' eyes darted around the room. He recognized every face. Some, like Johnny, had been "professional acquaintances"--people who, for one reason or another, had outlived their usefulness, and made someone angry enough to pay for Matrix' own brand of waste management. Others were colleagues, who, unlike Matrix, had killed for fun as well as profit. He stood motionless, unsure what it all meant. Then another voice shouted above the din, "C'mon Matrix, lemme buy you a drink, just to prove there's no hard feelings," said the tall, craggy man, pointing to the bullet hole in his forehead. "After all," he continued, with a note of satisfaction that chilled Matrix to the bone, "we'll be spending a lot of time together from now on."

Matrix didn't like the sound of that, not at all. "I'll take a raincheck, okay?" he said, stalling for time. "Right now, I gotta use the john." That's what had gotten him in this mess in the first place; maybe now it could help him get out of it.

The man's answering grin was almost a sneer. "Take your time, Matrix," he drawled. "I'm not going anywhere."

Matrix backed out of the room. His years of conditioning wouldn't allow him to take his eyes off the assortment of thugs in the room. When he was clear, he closed the door behind him, frowning. "What the hell am I doing here?" he muttered aloud. "It doesn't take a genius to see there wasn't a soul in that room worth saving."

"What was that, Mr. Matrix?" Charlie asked from behind him.

Matrix turned slowly. "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to sneak up on people?" he hissed. "I've got enough problems without you giving me a heart attack!"

"I reckon that's so, Mr. Matrix," Charlie agreed sadly. "I was hoping it would be different for you."

"What in hell..." Matrix began, an idea suddenly taking shape in his brain. "That's it, isn't it?" he shouted, his index

finger stabbing at Charlie. "This train's on its way to Hell, and unless I can find someone in there worth saving, I'll end up there, too."

"I'm afraid so."

Matrix passed a weary hand over his face as he tried to come to grips with his situation. "Isn't there anything else you can tell me?" he asked, his dark eyes intent.

"Nothing," Charlie said, sounding disappointed. "Except," he added, glancing at his pocket watch, "you have ten minutes left."

Matrix took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Thanks, Charlie. I think I'll go back in and have another look."

Charlie gave him an encouraging smile, his blue eyes hopeful. "Good luck, Mr. Matrix," he said, offering his hand. "If anyone can do this, you can."

Charlie has an interesting way of putting things, Matrix thought absently as he scanned the crowd once again, without success. *It'd be a shame if I let him down--in more ways than one.* Why was it so hard for him to walk into a room and find---

"ME!" he shouted, so loud it stunned the others into silence. "I'm in the room, too. I'm worth saving!" He had two minutes left. If he could get to Charlie, tell him to stop the train...

The craggy man spoke again, his words echoing in Matrix' head as he ripped open the door. "You'll be back for that drink someday, Matrix. You wait and see."

"Charlie?" Matrix called out, confused to be speaking to his own reflection in a bathroom mirror. <u>His</u> bathroom mirror, he realized with a sigh of relief. He splashed cold water on his face and was toweling it dry when he heard someone calling his name.

"Steven? Are you all right? I've been trying to reach you all day," Liz's voice drifted up the stairs.

"Never been better, Liz!" he declared. "Sit tight while I change clothes, and I'll take you to dinner."

"Really?" she said, trying not to sound too eager. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"To your fabulous sense of timing," he quipped. "Besides, generosity's good for the soul."

Dressed in a black turtleneck and jeans, he descended the stairs two at a time and ushered Liz toward the door.

"Wouldn't you like a drink first?" she asked, puzzled.

"No!" he answered, more sharply than he intended. "I mean, I'm starving--let's go eat."

Liz reached the door ahead of him, but Matrix lunged forward, determined to open it himself. "Well, what do you know," Liz commented in mock amazement. "Chivalry isn't dead, after all."

Matrix glanced upward. "Not by a long shot," he agreed.

MISS UNIVERSE

by Kathy Keetch

Robert Windlee was the image of a beauty pageant's master of ceremonies. He was imposing without actually towering over the contestants, he had good teeth, and his facelift was fairly recent. Every inch of him showed relaxed confidence and the ability to smile his way through any situation. During the weeks of preparation for the pageant, he had proven himself equal to any of the crises that had come up, and he expected a nice, smooth production.

It wasn't.

The pageant had begun normally enough with an uninspired, taped production number, which then cut over to the "parade of nations". Eighty young women, in costumes that were supposed to be representative of their native countries, each paraded across the stage, introduced herself, and walked up and down the ramps. They then lined themselves up in orderly rows along the stage.

"Two hours from now," Windlee announced enthusiastically, "one of these young women will be the new Miss Universe!"

The audience applauded and the emcee smiled genially into the camera, ready to begin talking again, every inch of him showing confidence from his shined shoes to his slightly wavy hair, competently oblivious to the sudden stir from something happening in the stage wings. He was forced to notice, though, when suddenly a young woman shot out onto the stage, stumbling slightly as though she'd been pushed. She looked almost as though she belonged in the pageant, being tall and stately, with dark hair curling around an aristocratic face. Her flowing white gown was as elegant a style as worn by any woman there. She was obviously not a contestant, though, because instead of beaming at the cameras she was looking distinctly annoyed at finding herself in the glare of the television lights.

Windlee just stood there, trying to hang onto his composure. He glanced around for the director. The director was in a tight knot of people in the wings; after a few moments he broke from the huddle and signaled for Windlee to go on.

Fortunately, Windlee was a seasoned pro. He pulled himself together, arranged his smile, and turned back to the camera.

"And here," he adlibbed, "is a surprise for me. In previous years, I've explained the rules of the competition to a red light on the camera. Tonight I have the pleasure of explaining them to

this lovely young woman." He turned his smile to the newcomer. "Welcome to the Miss Universe contest," he greeted her charmingly.

"Thank you," she replied in a voice as cool and cultured and her features, "but why is it called 'Miss Universe'? Surely they're all Earth human, if you're referring to the women gathered here."

The emcee's smile froze, then he forced a laugh at her wit. "Very good point," he said, "but surely they are among the loveliest girls in the universe?"

The woman raised one eyebrow disdainfully.

"And what is your name?" the emcee added hurriedly, seeing that she was about to make some reply to the first question.

"I am Romanadvoratrelundar," she said.

Windlee's smile looked even more fixed.

"Welcome," he said finally.

"Thank you," Romana said again, graciously.

"Yes. Now the rules of the competition are..." and Windlee smoothly made the transition into his prepared speech. He did an excellent job. One could almost swear that the mystery woman's arrival on-stage had been planned.

"Now is all that clear?" he concluded, speaking again to Romana.

"Not quite," she said firmly. "There's still a few things I don't understand."

Windlee took a deep breath, glancing past her for the director. Despite a commercial break being long overdue, the director was still signaling him to go on. "Perhaps the best way to explain would be for us to pretend that you're one of the contestants," he said gamely, thinking frantically. The audience, surprisingly, wasn't getting restless at the delays. They seemed to like Romana. "Why don't you introduce yourself like the contestants did--walk up to the microphone and say your name and where you're from," Windlee suggested.

She glanced quizzically at him, then stepped back a few paces. She, too, glanced into the wings, but she didn't seem to find the person she was looking for. Taking a breath, she walked smoothly back to the microphone.

"My name," she said, "is Romanadvoratrelundar, and I'm from Gallifrey."

"Where is that?" Windlee asked.

"It's in the constellation Kasterborous," Romana replied haughtily, as if <u>everyone</u> knew that.

There was an awkward pause.

"'Kasterborous'?" the emcee asked.

"Yes. I'm a Time Lord."

The poor man was definitely getting out of his depth. He looked around again for the director and, with relief, saw him signaling for a commercial.

"And perhaps, in a few hours from now, <u>you</u> may be the new Miss Universe," he ad libbed.

The cameras cut to a surprised-looking co-hostess, and Windlee sagged.

"What's going on?" he hissed as the director strode onstage towards him. "Who is she? What's she doing here? Get her off!"

The director was also being accosted by a contest official and representatives of several of the contestants.

"Please, calm down, it'll work out," the director was insisting. "I don't know exactly where she came from--there was suddenly her and this guy in a funny scarf backstage. He looked around, shoved her onstage, told us to keep her there, and left."

"And you did it?" the official asked.

"He had to," a new voice said. The head of the pageant's security team was with the group now. "That guy had credentials from some United Nations taskforce--top clearance. We've checked it out. This pageant is too vulnerable to all sorts of international terrorism. If the guy from UNIT said keep her here, the girl stays." He glanced towards romana, who had bene striding determinedly towards an exit. She was blocked by security men.

"Sorry, miss," one of them said, "but orders are that you stay on the stage."

And she did stay. The contestants had to be reassured that her presence wouldn't affect the outcome of the contest, but most

people watching accepted Romana as part of the pageant. The show went on, following Windlee's idea of having Romana participate as a way of explaining the contest. The explanations were needed, too--Romana may have had more poise and self-confidence that the rest of the contestants put together, but she didn't seem to have the least idea of what was going on. "Beauty pageants" were not a concept she had studied at the Academy, she once commented.

Only once did it seem as though she'd grasped the general idea behind it all, and even then she hadn't quite gotten it. That occurred during the swimsuit competition. Romana never changed out of her long, white gown, but she watched carefully and listened intently as the co-hostesses of the pageant reintroduced each contestant by name, country, and "vital statistics".

"And, of course," Windlee announced as the last contestant left the ramps, "here once again is Miss, er, Gallifrey, who is, um..."

"I think I understand now," Romana announced, breaking into the emcee's hurried estimate of her bodily dimensions.

"You understand?" he asked warily.

"Yes, I think I see the purpose of this gathering now," Romana said earnestly. "It's some sort of fertility rite, isn't it?"

The strained note in Windlee's amiable laugh was lost in the gasps and howls coming from the audience. The contestants were starting to get restless, but the audience was having a far more interesting time than they had anticipated.

"What makes you think that?" the emcee managed to ask.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Romana countered. "Why else would everyone be so obsessed with the physical dimensions of these women's bodies, with particular emphasis on the mammary glands and width of the pelvic girdle?"

Some of the contestants began to look upset. Windlee looked horrified.

"No!" he insisted. Then, catching himself, he smiled nervously at the cameras and took a deep breath. "And that's the swimsuit competition," he announced. "And we'll be back to learn the results of the swimsuit competition after this word from our sponsors."

"What are you trying to do?" he demanded as soon as he was off camera.

"Look, I'm sorry if I've done something wrong," Romana said icily, "but I didn't choose to be here, and I'd be only too happy to leave if your security force would permit it."

The director came back for another conference with the emcee, looking more unhappy than ever.

"Well?" Windlee demanded.

The director shook his head. "Security. She stays," he said and went back to the security of the wings.

The pageant limped gamely on and eventually arrived at the point where the finalists were asked a question. Once again Romana was included. First the finalists were brought forward, one at a time, to be asked their question. Their answers were marvels of normality, and the emcee, judges, and officials all began to relax a little.

"And now, Miss Gallifrey," the emcee said. He even summoned up a charming smile for Romana as she came to the microphone. "Your question is," he said, and paused for dramatic effect. "If you were chosen to be Miss Universe, how would you use your title to bring about understanding between nations and world peace?" Sincerity oozed from Windlee as he spoke.

Romana stared him down.

"Don't be so simplistic," she said, shattering his fragile hope that maybe things would finally start going right. "A mere 'beauty contest' title couldn't possibly be used to bring about world peace, particularly when the skewed nature of the representation of world nations, as present here, is considered. Also, even if one should accept that such a premise was possible, it would still be a fallacy to assume that I, as the hypothesized winner, would make the attempt to use my title to bring about world peace. Such an attempt on my part would be a violation of non-interference, which is the strictest of all Time Lord laws."

"Really?" Windlee was still trying to act as though Romana's answers were perfectly normal. "What do you do if someone does interfere?"

"It happens very seldom," Romana assured him. Then, as if remembering a string of grievances, she added through gritted teeth, "The last one was exiled."

"Really?" Windlee asked. He had given up.

"Yes," she said, ready to go on talking.

"Ah, well. Oh," Windlee said, suddenly coming back to life. The director was flashing him a signal, and he responded automatically. "Yes. Well, the judges are tallying their results, and in a few moments, we will be crowning the new Miss Universe, right after a few words from our sponsor."

The cameras cut away again, and the emcee stared at Romana hopelessly, wondering what he could possibly do with her now. Romana wasn't paying any attention to him, however; she was arguing with the security guards again.

"This is pointless," she was insisting. "Why don't you just let me leave and..."

"Romana," someone called from behind the emcee. Windlee turned. If he had still been capable of being surprised, the sight of the tall, curly haired man striding towards the woman, a long scarf trailing on the stage behind him. He flashed Windlee a grin that carried more wattage than even Windlee's best smile.

"Doctor, where have you been?" she snapped. "What's been happening? Why am I being forced to participate in this primitive ritual?"

"Educational, isn't it?" he said, bustling her offstage. "I knew you'd enjoy it while I took care of some business."

"Business? Doctor, what do you mean?"

"I had a delivery to make." His voice, deeper and much more beautiful than Windlee's, boomed from the wings as they exited. "And I thought you'd enjoy learning some of the native customs."

"Native customs?" Romana's voice was carrying, too, though hers would have cut diamonds with the controlled anger in it.

"And when we're less busy, I'll tell you about April Fools Day, but we've still got three segments to collect. Or have you forgotten?"

"Have I forgotten?"

Their voices faded. Windlee stood looking in the direction they had taken as they'd disappeared offstage, numb with what had been happening. He hardly heard, as he turned back to the cameras, the raucous, groaning noise that broke out backstage a minute later. That noise, too, faded quickly away, leaving nothing but the normal hubbub of the Miss Universe pageant, the kind of noise that Windlee was more than capable of handling.

VAMPIRE EDITOR
By Susan Patric

When Bethany's mortal friends chose her to edit their next fanzine, she saw no reason not to accept. She'd had centuries to memorize all those picky punctuation and spelling rules--she hadn't dangled a participle in over 500 years. Staff meetings were always at night, and although some lasted until the wee hours, no one ever stayed until the sun came up. And best of all, there was no reason to risk exposure by using her hypnotic powers.

Or so she thought.

A week before the fanzine was to go to the printer, the staff began to rebel. "Can't we go to the movies instead of hanging around your place staring at blank sheets of paper?" said one. "I hear there's a great bun shot in Kevin Kline's latest flick."

"How can I work when we're out of white cheddar cheese popcorn?" whined another.

"Are you <u>sure</u> there should be so many commas?" questioned a third.

"This limerick won't be finished until I can find a word that rhymes with 'orange'," added another.

Bethany sighed. It had been going so well...

She turned her green, glowing gaze to the cinema buff. "You don't want to go to the movies tonight." Th-thump, th-thump. "Kevin Kline's buns aren't nearly as important to you as meeting our deadline." Th-thump, th-thump.

Kevin's buns must be pretty spectacular, Bethany thought irritably. *She should be agreeing with me by now.* She decided to try another approach. "The sight of Kevin's buns will be your reward once the 'zine is finished." Th-thump, th-thump.

"Once the 'zine is finished," her companion repeated.

She turned quickly to her next victim. "You <u>hate</u> white cheddar cheese popcorn." Th-thump, th-thump.

"Hate it," the snacker whispered back. So far, so good.

Bethany wasted no time congratulating herself. She focused her gaze once more. "Commas are good," she declared. "There have always been commas." Th-thump, th-thump. "You have always known there were commas." Th-thump, th-thump.

"Always...commas," her friend agreed.

Three down, one to go. "Your limerick is about Bodie, not Doyle," she suggested gently. "Bodie wouldn't be caught dead eating an orange." Th-thump, th-thump.

"No...dead...orange," the poet mumbled.

The fanzine was completed right on time, and Bethany thought her troubles were over. *But what if it doesn't sell?*

"YOU WILL BUY THIS FANZINE." TH-THUMP, TH-THUMP.

"YOU WILL LIKE IT SO MUCH, YOU'LL BUY COPIES FOR ALL YOUR FRIENDS." TH-THUMP, TH-THUMP....

The Truth Will Out
by Linda Tomazi

War. it was such a tedious way to gain power. Bethel sighed and moved away from the window, her brief silver vestments shimmering as she walked. A frown marred her perfect features as her thoughts turned to Dirk Blackpool. She was beginning to realize that the dark prince would never marry her. The heir to the throne of Blackpool was probably just stringing her along. Whatever love she had for Dirk was quickly turning to anger--and hate. A woman scorned was a force to reckon with, and when that woman was a witch...

An evil light came into Bethel's eyes as she smiled wickedly. If she couldn't be queen of Blackpool with Dirk--she'd be queen another way.

As if in answer to her unspoken thoughts, there was a crash from across the room. Bethel turned to see Geoffrey Blackpool picking himself up off the floor. Geoffrey was Dirk's younger brother, almost as handsome, but extremely stupid. Geoffrey could be molded, shaped, manipulated, poked, prodded, led--

"Bethel! Do you know <u>where</u> Dirk is?" Geoffrey asked irritably. Bethel realized he'd asked the question several times, judging by the tone of his voice. With a toss of her long blond hair, Bethel undulated toward Geoffrey, her hazel eyes sparkling hypnotically. She smiled as Geoffrey fell under her spell. Now all she had to do was get rid of Dirk.

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"I don't want excuses! I want results!" Dirk thundered, sweeping the maps off the table with one arm. His dark blue eyes blazing, he turned toward the man across the room. "Vector, I want to win this war, I want to obliterate the South! You promised <u>I</u> would prevail! What is going wrong?!?" Dirk shouted, stalking over to the smaller man. "You're my wizard, <u>do</u> something!"

"Now, now, my lord, calm yourself," Vector said placatingly. "If I could only have my monocle for a few moments, I could turn the tide irrevocably to a Northern win." He reached greedily toward the crystal hanging on a chain around Dirk's neck.

Dirk stepped back quickly, a small smile starting around his mouth. "What kind of fool do you think I am, Vector? Do you really think I would trust you with the monocle?" he said, holding up the crystal. Looking at the monocle, which was the source as well as the focus of Vector's powers, Dirk's smile widened. "I may be upset, but I'm not stupid," he said in that soft deadly tone Vector knew so well. Leaning closer, Dirk whispered fiercely, "Don't trust me, because I will <u>never</u> trust you. That is what <u>you</u> taught me Vector. Practice what you preach!" Blackpool straightened and turned, his black cape swirling around him. Running a careless hand through his dark brown hair, he spoke without turning, "Find a way for me to win, Vector. Or I <u>will</u> find a way to kill you." With that threat

hanging in the air, Dirk strode out of the room, leaving a fuming Vector behind.

"That pipsqueak! That upstart! I made you, I can break you!" Vector shouted.

"Really?" a cool voice asked. Spinning around, Vector saw Bethel standing by the open doorway. The witch smirked at Vector before she asked, "And how did you 'make' Dirk? Are you the one who locked him in that secret room with all those spiders? Is that when you began to poison him? Did you mean to possess him totally, use him?" she mocked.

"Yes," Vector hissed. "But his will, like his father's, was too strong. I only managed to turn his character, to make him almost as ruthless and evil as I am!"

"And now your creation is out of control, isn't he? You never expected him to steal your monocle, did you?" Bethel asked sarcastically.

"You never expected him to marry you, did you?" Vector mocked. Bethel smiled and stretched out her hand, replete with a large diamond ring.

"From Dirk?" Vector gasped, unbelieving.

"Not exactly," Bethel purred. "His brother."

Vector's laugh resounded through the castle as Bethel fumed silently. He stopped short when Bethel asked him if he wanted his monocle back.

"Of course I do," Vector snapped out.

"Well then," Bethel replied, slinking to the window. "Dirk is walking around the moat, and now is the perfect time..."

"For what?" Vector asked suspiciously.

"For a sudden loss of memory," Bethel answered. "A sudden, <u>total</u> loss." Both wizards laughed evilly as Bethel began her incantation.

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He stumbled and caught himself, leaning against a tree. Where was he? Looking down at his black clothes he suddenly realized there was a more important question. <u>Who</u> was he? Sinking slowly to the ground, he buried his face in his hands. After a few minutes, he raised his head, thinking dejectedly that his entire memory was gone. What in heaven's name had happened to him?

His clothes, though a bit dirty, were well made and expensive looking. His knee boots were made of that soft, supple leather that lasted a long time. He was dressed all in black--was he a priest? No, the sword lying coldly against his thigh disproved that. Looking at his reflection in the nearby stream, he noted thick brown hair, dark blue eyes, strong nose, full lips. An intelligent and somewhat attractive face, he thought.

The dark man stood up, absently noting he was rather tall. He realized something was hanging around his neck. Lifting the silver chain carefully, he saw a large teardrop crystal at the end. The crystal sparkled and glowed with an unearthly light. *Magic*, he thought, but how did he know that? Was he a wizard?

He concealed the crystal in his breastplate as he turned to investigate a noise. There was a dark form coming toward him.

The tall man stepped back, every instinct telling him to run, that there was great danger here. He waited a split second more before running in the opposite direction, not caring where he ran, just away. Away from the dark form and the nameless terror welling up inside him.

****

Prince Erik Greystone was not a happy camper. The war was not going well at all. Since the full scale assaults from the North had started, there had been a stalemate. Neither side could gain an advantage.

Erik was a man of action, and no action at all frustrated him. When he was frustrated, he had to do something. So he'd jumped on Southwind and rode off. Now the horse was spent and Erik was cursing his own stupidity. Southwind was an excellent horse, but he wasn't indestructible. Walking slowly beside Southwind, he listened to the horse regain a steady breathing rhythm.

Patting the white horse's neck, Erik murmured soothing and apologetic words. Southwind blew softly through his nose and shook his head slightly. Erik rubbed Southwind's nose affectionately, and smiled. His restless mood had lifted considerably. Now that Southwind seemed recovered, Erik got ready to mount the stallion and ride back.

Southwind sidestepped slightly, his ears pricking. Erik stopped and listed carefully. He's survived a few ambushes by paying attention when Southwind was skittish. After a few moments Erik heard the sounds of someone crashing through the brush. Throwing back his gold cape, he drew his enchanted sword. The silver weapon gleamed brightly in the darkness. Erik didn't seem to notice the tip of his sword sparkled gold.

He hadn't used the weapon since Marko and he had been transported to an alternate universe. A world where Dirk was good and Erik Greystone was pure evil. It had only been a week ago, and Erik shivered slightly, recalling the events. If the alternate Trayquil (a crusty old <u>woman</u>) hadn't put a truth spell on the alternate Dirk's sword, that Dirk would never have been able to destroy the alternate Greystone. But the truth spell had worked, forcing Greystone to realize only his force of will had kept him existing. When he had realized that, he'd crumbled into dust. What Erik didn't realize is that the alternate Trayquil had heard Erik's regret that he and his world's Dirk were not friends. She had put a truth spell on Erik's sword, with a slight spell on Erik that kept him from using the sword until he met Dirk. That small spell was gone now, for unbeknownst to Erik, the man crashing towards him was Dirk Blackpool. Erik breathed deeply and waited.

The dark prince stopped and leaned against a tree, trying to catch his breath. The dark form had resolved itself into a short man, whose sharp features shimmered with evil. Little did the tall man know, but that face belonged to his very own wizard.

Vector stopped several yards from Dirk, and smiled. This was going to be too easy, the wizard thought gleefully. Without his memory, Dirk wouldn't know the monocle's power or who Vector was.

The wizard could get the monocle and kill Dirk. It would have to be quick, for Bethel needed careful watching. If Vector had had time, he would have made Dirk pay for humiliating him all these years. Vector sighed and then shrugged. He would just have to be content with thinking about torturing Dirk. As the wizard started forward, Dirk's head jerked up. But Blackpool was not looking at him. Vector peered into the darkness and smiled slowly. Better still for Dirk to be killed by his lifelong enemy. Vector wished for one moment he could have influenced Prince Erik as well, and then shook himself mentally. Erik Greystone approached Dirk Blackpool with his sword drawn. Dirk stumbled back a few steps as Erik advanced. The blond prince frowned and Vector knew he was thinking this was not like Dirk at all. Vector feared for an instant Erik would break off the attack, but then Dirk drew his sword as well. Dark and light prince joined in battle. Vector realized suddenly that Dirk was not attacking, but merely defending himself.

Vector watched, fascinated, as Erik easily disarmed Dirk. The black prince fell to the ground as Erik raised his sword. Vector held his breath in anticipation. Every fiber of his being was screaming--now, now, now! Erik brought the sword down in a perfect arc as Dirk scrambled backwards. The enchanted sword cut deeply into Dirk's breastplate, striking sparks as it hit the monocle hidden underneath. For a brief instant a golden glow surrounded Dirk and then he vanished.

Erik stood staring in amazement at the spot where Dirk had been. Vector cursed whatever gods he could think of. Obviously, Bethel's spell hadn't been total. Dirk must have remembered how to transport himself. The wizard knew he'd have to find Dirk quickly. If the spell was defective, Vector didn't want Dirk remembering anything before he had a chance to kill him.

But when the wizard tried to move, he found he couldn't. Looking down, he was horrified to see his legs were turning into stony roots. The cold hardness crept quickly up his body. His last thought before the stone claimed his skull was that Dirk was going to pay dearly for this.

****

Dirk drifted slowly to awareness. Remembering what had been happening before, he gave a cry and struggled to sit up. A gentle hand pushed him back, as a cool cloth was placed on his forehead. Dirk realized he was lying on a bed and someone was murmuring soothing sounds.

Forcing his eyes open, Dirk quickly shut them as the room tilted alarmingly. Breathing deeply, he realized someone was speaking to him.

"Now, now, it's alright," a gentle female voice said. "You've had a fever for several days, but it's broken. You should be fine in a little bit." When Dirk did not open his eyes, the voice continued, encouragingly, "Why not try to open your eyes again--this time slowly."

Dirk obeyed the gentle command, and this time the world tilted only slightly. As he blinked, the room righted itself and the

owner of the voice came into focus. The woman was slender and beautiful, with dark blond hair hanging in a thick braid down her back. She'd turned to refresh the cloth on Dirk's forehead. As she turned to face Dirk, she saw he was awake and she smiled.

"Am I dead? Is this heaven?" whispered Dirk hoarsely.

"No, you're still on earth, thank heaven," the woman smiled. "Why did you ask that?"

"Because I thought I saw an angel," Dirk replied before he slipped into sleep.

****

Dirk awakened to the tantalizing smell of freshly-baked bread. Opening his eyes, he was relieved to find the room stayed put. Turning his head slowly, Dirk saw the blond woman placing a light brown loaf on a nearby table. His movement must have caught her eye, for she turned and walked toward him, smiling.

She pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down. "How are you feeling today? You've been asleep for a while now," she said softly.

"Better," Dirk answered. "How long was I...?"

"Asleep?" the woman finished for him. "Well, the fever lasted four days and you've been asleep for about two. I've fed you a bit of broth. Would you like a little now?"

"No--yes...I mean," Dirk sighed. "Who <u>are</u> you? Why are you helping me? Should I know you?"

The woman laughed, her green eyes sparkling. "I'm sorry. My name is Mreelynd, and you <u>needed</u> help. I found you in the field next to my house on my way home from the market. And I know you a lot better than you know me," she answered, rising to fetch some broth from the kettle simmering on the hearth.

As she was fixing a light meal for him, Dirk realized belatedly what she meant. He was no longer wearing the black clothes he'd had on in the forest. Instead he wore a light cotton nightshirt with the front ties loosely done up. A wide bandage covered the middle of his chest. Forgetting his embarrassment at having been undressed by a stranger, Dirk traced the bandage with one hand.

Mreelynd saw Dirk's frown as she resumed her seat and said,"You had a long, deep scrape on your chest. I thought it should be bandaged, but it looked like it was healing."

"Just a scrape?" Dirk frowned. "I thought..." his voice trailed off as his frown deepened.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Mreelynd asked, concern in her voice.

"I...I don't know," Dirk said softly. "I don't remember." He looked at Mreelynd uncertainly.

"It's alright," she smiled. "Sometimes a trauma and a fever will jumble things up a bit," she continued as she tucked a napkin around Dirk's neck. Picking up the soup bowl and spoon, she paused and then asked,"By the way, what's your name?"

Dirk's eyes widened in terror as fleeting memories of an evil face and a shining sword flitted across his mind. Seeing the

horror her question evoked, Mreelynd put the bowl and spoon back on the tray and placed one hand on Dirk's arm.

His eyes were haunted as he met her concerned gaze. "I don't know," he whispered. "I can't remember."

****

Several days later, Dirk was strong enough to get out of bed and sit in a chair. With a little help from Mreelynd, he'd managed to pull slacks, socks and a loose shirt on. Mreelynd had taken to calling him Michael, for want of another name. Dirk could see more of the house now. It was not a large cottage, but it was clean and sturdy. His bed was at the far end of a large kitchen. Opposite was a hearth, where he sat now, was a table and several chairs. Through the doorway, Dirk could see a small sitting room and beyond, a bedroom.

"Mreelynd, may I ask you something?" Dirk queried, as she changed his bed linen. She looked up and smiled her consent, so Dirk continued, "Why 'Michael'?"

For a brief moment, a look of pain crossed Mreelynd's face. Dirk felt a pang of remorse that he had hurt her, but then she shook her head slightly and smiled at him. "Michael was my brother's name," she answered. "I loved him very much. He was honest, strong and very good looking. You remind me of him."

"Where is he now?" Dirk asked gently.

"In heaven," Mreelynd replied, smoothing the folded quilt in her arms. "He was killed by an inhuman monster," she added vehemently.

"Who?" Dirk prodded, hating this monster for causing Mreelynd pain. He was rather surprised to feel so strongly, but Dirk had come to care for the gentle lady in a very short time.

"Prince Dirk Blackpool," Mreelynd answered bitterly. "The same monster who's destroying the North with his infernal war. The news from the capitol is King Cyrus Blackpool is dead, which means Dirk is now King of Blackpool." Mreelynd turned and placed the quilt back on the bed. When she turned back, she saw Dirk lost in thought and rubbing his temples.

"Michael?" Are you alright?" she asked, crossing over to his chair.

Dirk looked up at her, and smiled weakly. "I'm afraid I've got another headache," he said thinly. "I guess I overdid it today."

"Let's get you back to bed then," Mreelynd said briskly helping him up. "And I'll get a cool cloth for your head." Dirk was only too happy to oblige, but couldn't help but wonder why these headaches came on when he tried to remember something about his past.

****

At Castle Baaldorf, Erik Greystone was explaining for what seemed the millionth time how Dirk Blackpool had disappeared in front of his eyes. Everyone else seemed to think it was just a trick that Dirk had pulled off. But Erik wasn't so sure.

"I dunno, Marko," Erik said to his vassal as they walked down a corridor. "Something just felt wrong about Dirk, I can't place it, but--"

"But nothing, sweetcheeks," cackled a familiar feminine voice. "Did it work?"

The two men whirled and saw the alternate Trayquil floating a few inches above the ground.

"Trayquil! What are you doing here?" Erik exclaimed.

"I came to see how my spell worked out," the old woman replied. "Well?"

"What spell?" Marko asked.

"My spell of truth, big boy," Trayquil sniffed. "I put some on Erik's sword, so he could use it on Dirk. How'd it go?" the female wizard demanded.

"I--I'm not sure," Erik stuttered. "I think it may have killed him. I touched him with the sword and he disappeared. And there're reports that King Cyrus is dead, but Dirk is nowhere to be found, so Geoffrey will assume the throne."

"Balderdash, my spell wouldn't kill anyone," Trayquil snorted. "You better check your sources, sweetcheeks--I'll get back to you."

With a puff of smoke, she vanished. Erik and Marko exchanged concerned looks. Dirk was ruthless, but Geoffrey would be an even worse king--he could be led and molded by the evil Vector. The pair set off down the hall, determined to find out exactly what had happened to Dirk.

****

A month of searching had brought Erik and Marko no closer to finding Dirk. What was worse, the pair had heard that Geoffrey and Bethel were to be married shortly. Of Vector, there had been no clues either. Both wizard and dark prince had vanished without a trace.

Erik was extremely troubled by Dirk's disappearance. The spell had only forced him to touch Dirk with the sword, but what if Erik <u>had</u> killed him? Knowing that the alternate Trayquil's spell could have changed Dirk to the good was what troubled Erik. After all, Erik and the alternate Dirk had started to become friends, leading Erik to hope that his Dirk could become a friend too. Erik thought of Dirk's brilliant mind turned to good construction instead of evil destruction. The possibilities were endless, and Aperans--north and south--would benefit greatly. He hadn't heard from the alternate Trayquil yet, but Erik fiercely hoped that Dirk lived and had been changed. But if he still lived, where was he?

****

The object of Erik's pondering was at that moment sitting on the porch of a cottage about fifty miles from Castle Blackpool. Dirk rested his arms on his thighs and sighed. Working Mreelynd's farm had strengthened his body and healed his psyche--but his memory loss was still total. Even the troubling dreams

that had plagued his nights at first had gone. By and large, he was happy. Dirk felt like he was in love with Mreelynd, but that was what troubled him now. He didn't even know his real name, how could he tie her to a nameless past?

Standing suddenly, he ran a careless hand through his hair and stopped abruptly. The gesture had brought back a memory so crystal clear that it took his breath away. Dirk found himself in a room littered with maps, an overturned table was on his right. To his left and slightly behind him was...Dirk's eyes widened as he recognized the small dark man in his memory as the same man who had been stalking him in the woods. Who was this evil being? And why did Dirk remember such mutual animosity between them?

Frowning, Dirk tried to bring more detail out of the memory. He saw himself and he heard someone call him "my lord". Or was the voice directed elsewhere? No, he remembered only the two of them. As he concentrated, Dirk's eyes narrowed as he saw the crystal pendant hanging around his own neck in the memory. His hand flew to grasp the silver chain beneath his shirt. Dirk hadn't minded putting away his black clothes, but he'd been oddly reluctant to part with the chain. He pulled the chain out and stared at it--more specifically, at the place where the crystal pendant should have been. Why had he forgotten that? Dirk paced, as he remembered the pendant had been there in the woods, had been there when that blond madman had attacked him. The dark prince stopped in his tracks as he remembered the silver arc of steel coming toward him, the sparks as the sword connected with him. The pendant! The sword must have touched the pendant, that's what the sparks were.

Breathing harshly, Dirk felt a small corner of the barrier in his mind start to crumble. In the woods, he'd seen a golden glow about himself and felt a strange warmth. He had wished then that he were somewhere else--and suddenly he had been. Dirk remembered sinking down by the side of a road and then...his shoulders sagged as he realized that the memory flow had stopped. Biting his lower lip in frustration, Dirk looked down at his fist clenched tightly around the silver chain. Perhaps he should just throw the stupid thing away. His fist relaxed as a tiny voice from deep inside him said 'Not yet'.

A light touch on his shoulder caused him to spin around. Mreelynd stood on the porch, holding a candle and looking down at him. "I didn't mean to disturb you, but it's getting late," she smiled at him.

"Yes, it is," Dirk agreed, realizing it had grown quite dark while he'd been thinking. He stepped up on the porch with her and smiled.

"You were so lost in thought, did you remember something?" she asked, looking up now at his handsome face. The face being questioned darkened slightly in the soft glow of the candle. Dirk shook his head and his smile returned as he answered softly, "Nothing substantial. Just bits and pieces that don't make sense."

"They will," Mreelynd assured him, as she led the way inside. "Just give it time."

As Dirk closed the door behind him, he saw Mreelynd pick up a piece of paper and stuff it into the pocket of her apron.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

Startled, Mreelynd looked up guiltily. "Oh nothing. A fair in honor of King Geoffrey's marriage. It's stupid to honor that moron, but I thought..."

"It would take my mind off my problems," Dirk finished for her.

Smiling shyly, she nodded. "I know how much you want to remember, how important it is to you," the words tumbled out of her, "but it doesn't matter to me, I know you're a good man and I don't care who you were before, I lo-...uh, I mean, I care a great deal for you." Mreelynd's words stumbled to a halt and she looked at Dirk beseechingly.

"I...care, about you too, Mreelynd," he said softly. "And if you think I'm okay, that's all that matters. I thought you'd be upset to have someone love you who has no idea of his past," Dirk smiled bitterly.

Mreelynd brightened considerably at Dirk's unconscious admission of love. "Then we'll go the fair?" she asked with a smile.

"Why not? We could use a holiday!" Dirk exclaimed, laughing loudly as Mreelynd spun him into a short dance.

****

The next day dawned bright and clear. Mreelynd and Dirk were both up early, dressed in their best. They reached the fair grounds as the crowd was just beginning to swell. Wending their way through the people, Dirk bought a couple of meatrolls and gave one to Mreelynd. They walked around, people-watching as they ate.

"What do you want to do first?" asked Dirk, brushing crumbs off his hands.

"I think we just did it," Mreelynd said gaily, holding up the last bite of her meatroll and popping it in her mouth.

Dirk laughed and conceded, "Okay, what do you want to do second?"

Swallowing hard, Mreelynd said, "I'd like to look at those shawls first. I need a new one." As they approached the stall, Dirk's eyes were caught by a gossamer white shawl with multicolored threads woven through it. Fingering it gently, he smiled as he imagined Mreelynd wearing this. Seeing his smile, Mreelynd ruefully shook her head. "Much too fragile and terribly impractical," she said and then sighed. "But it is beautiful," she added wistfully. She turned to the more practical shawls and made her selection. Sturdy, blue, and warm. But Dirk saw her gazing at the white shawl longingly. Meeting his eyes, she smiled and then turned to take her wrapped purchase from the vendor.

The two then proceeded to shop and play games and have fun. Once Dirk slipped away and then rejoined Mreelynd with a mischievous glint in his eye. He surreptitiously slipped a small

light package into the bulging tote that held all their purchases.

The day was drawing to a close when they decided to leave. Hefting the tote on one shoulder, Dirk followed Mreelynd out of the crowd. Once they'd cleared most of the people, Dirk pulled abreast of Mreelynd. She linked her arm in Dirk's and he looked down at her in surprise. Her upturned face was radiating happiness and she looked even more beautiful than ever. Stopping by the side of the road, Dirk lowered the bag and faced Mreelynd. Looking into her eyes, he saw faint puzzlement give way to silent acceptance. Bending down, his lips gently brushed hers, as her arms wound around his neck. Pressing closer, they deepened the kiss, both lost in the wonderful new sensation.

Pulling back slightly, Dirk gazed once more into Mreelynd's eyes. He found only love sparkling there and he smiled, not caring who he was, not caring where he was.

Both were so caught up in the other, that neither saw the man careening towards them. He slammed into the entwined couple and only Dirk's superior size and strength kept all three upright.

Releasing Mreelynd, Dirk rounded on the man, grabbing him roughly and pushing him away.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" Dirk shouted, anger suffusing his face.

The man growled and turned to begin a fight. Dirk prepared to fend the man off, when his would-be assailant stopped dead in his tracks and blanched. Dirk frowned as the man fell to his knees and began to grovel on the ground. Mreelynd exchanged a puzzled glance with Dirk and then shouted a warning as two more soldiers ran up. But they too stopped when they caught site of Dirk's face.

As the other two knelt, the first one raised slightly and said, "Please, my lord, forgive me. I didn't recognize you. Don't kill me."

"What?" Dirk asked incredulously, almost physically feeling the mental barrier in his mind begin to shimmer and dissolve.

"I do beg your forgiveness, my lord Blackpool. I should have watched where I was going," the man had begun to babble. "Please, I beg of you, don't kill me, Prince Dirk!"

"Prince Dirk?" he repeated as the wall in his mind came crashing down and memory came flooding back. "Dirk Blackpool...I'm Dirk Blackpool!" Joyous at finally remembering who he was, Dirk turned to find Mreelynd regarding him with a mixture of horror and disgust. Belatedly, he realized he was the man who had killed her brother. Reaching out to her, he was mortified when she shrank back from his touch. With a small cry, she turned and ran away.

More than anything in the world, Dirk wanted to run after her, but he knew his princely duty. Or his kingly duty. Straightening his shoulders, he turned briskly toward the three cowering soldiers.

"Up on your feet," Dirk barked. "You, get me a horse. I need to stop my brother's marriage and reclaim my rightful place." The man turned and ran to fetch a horse.

Looking down at the man who'd run into him, Dirk held out the bag of goods. "I want you to take this bag and take it to the Lady Mreelynd. And then join us on the road to Castle Blackpool." His tone brooked no argument, the man scurried away with his burden.

The other soldier stood at attention, guarding his liege lord. Sighing, Dirk turned away and mourned the loss of his new life. But he resolved that his old life would be vastly changed, for he had changed. From now on, Dirk would be true to himself, and that would mean getting rid of Vector. Pulling out the silver chain, which he knew now was what was left of Vector's monocle, Dirk realized that almost his entire memory had Vector's image clouded over it. Closing his eyes, a vivid image of Vector pushing him into the secret room filled with spiders flashed in his mind. That event had changed him so. First it had nearly killed him, and then it had turned his mind to evil purposes. All the lost opportunities with his father and his brother welled up before him. All the chances for peace with the South irretrievably gone.

Dirk's eyes snapped open at the horrible realization that he had been duped and used all these years by Vector. That Vector had caused the war to stretch on and on, depleting the North severely. That Vector had caused all the misery and suffering of Dirk's people. That Vector had caused his father's death and...Michael's. Hating Vector more and more at each passing moment, Dirk resolved to find some means to destroy the wizard. Looking at the silver chain, he wondered if the wizard was still alive after the destruction of his monocle. Clenching the chain fiercely in his fist, he promised himself that Vector's destruction would be the last act of the 'evil' Dirk Blackpool. King Dirk would be 180 degrees beyond Prince Dirk.

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A hush fell over the royal congregation as the bishop began to intone the marriage vows. The castle hall was awash with colorful blooms, matched only by the colors of the outfits of the guests. Geoffrey stood at the altar, looking almost handsome in his dark green doublet and hose. The effect was marred somewhat by his rigid posture and glassy stare. Anyone who knew magic would have recognized that he was under a spell, but fortunately for the bride, she was the only one in the throng who knew. Bethel had outdone herself for her wedding gown, creating a piece that was at once demure and very revealing. She smiled as the bishop began to ask Geoffrey to repeat the vows after him. At last, she would be queen, at last all of her dreams would come true, at last Dirk and Vector were gone forev--

"Stop!" yelled a very familiar masculine voice at the back of the hall. The crowd began to buzz as heads turned and recognized the speaker. Bethel turned and went pale as she saw the man striding toward her, his long legs closing the gap between them quickly.

Dirk Blackpool stood before her, and from the look of fury on his face, he had a complete hold on his memory.

"This marriage will not take place," he thundered to the quaking bishop. "I forbid it, as King of Blackpool!"

"You miscreant toad!" Bethel shrieked, her face contorted with ugly rage. "You're supposed to be dead! Why aren't you--"

In the middle of her tirade, Dirk's fury cooled and he calmly reached over and ripped the monocle from around her neck. Before her astonished eyes, he closed one hand around the crystal and pulverized it. She shrieked with dismay and disappeared in a blaze of flame and smoke.

Geoffrey blinked and swayed, looking around owlishly at the cluster of people around him. Many of them were congratulating Dirk, but why? Taking an uncertain step toward his brother, Geoffrey realized he had no memory of events for the last few weeks or so. Everything was hazy...something about Bethel...

Seeing his brother's puzzled face, Dirk reached out and clasped his brother's shoulder. "It's all right now, little brother. We'll make things right, you'll see. Together, we can set Blackpool to rights and bring peace to Aperans." Turning to the crowd, Dirk said, his voice rising with emotion, "Together, my people, we can not fail. Are you with me?!"

Geoffrey's cheers mingled with the crowds as he realized Dirk had come home--in more ways than one. His happiness made him cheer more, for his king--returned safe, and his loving brother--returned at last.

****

True to his word, Dirk began to pull the kingdom out of the darkness and misery it had been in for so long. He found the South extremely receptive towards peace, and was gratified to learn they wanted to help in the reconstruction of the North.

With food and materials coming from the kingdoms of Baaldorf and Greystone, the people of Blackpool began to hope that their lives were finally changing for the better. Renewed hope brought renewed strength, and the people began to pitch in with increased fervor.

The land was cleared of war debris rather quickly, leaving large barren patches of ground. Dead trees were cut down, hauled away and new ones planted. Bombed out buildings were razed, and whole villages underwent renovations.

Castle Blackpool was undergoing renovations as well. At first, Dirk had been reluctant to spend money on the building, but Geoffrey and Erik had convinced him that a renovated castle would be a source of national pride. So the land around it was cleared, the moat was drained, cleaned and refilled, and the wild thorn bushes adorning the walls were ripped away. The walls themselves were repaired and polished until they shone like ebony glass.

Inside, the work continued slowly. Rooms were aired, cleaned and hung with fresh, bright tapestries. The east tower had been completed first, so Dirk set up his command center in the highest room. It was here that Dirk retreated when he had to think. Geoffrey found him leaning on the windowsill, looking out at what eventually would be the courtyard garden.

"Dirk?" the younger man asked uncertainly, stopping in the doorway. Dirk turned and looked at his brother. Geoffrey took a few steps towards him and stopped, clearing his throat.

"Geoffrey, if you have something to say, just say it," Dirk snapped irritably, returning his gaze to the courtyard below. He felt, more than saw, Geoffrey flinch at his tone. Dirk sighed and ran one hand through his hair. Squaring his shoulders, he turned and smiled at Geoffrey. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit tired. What's on your mind?" Dirk asked, gesturing to a chair.

Taking the offered seat, Geoffrey leaned forward as Dirk sat opposite him. "Are you all right?" Geoffrey asked anxiously.

"I told you I was tired," Dirk replied, rubbing his temple with one hand. The headache that had been threatening all morning was now a full blown pounding.

"But you sent the architect and the chief gardener racing out of here, fearing for their lives. Are you..." Geoffrey trailed off, looking down at his wringing hands.

Dirk smiled at his brother through the haze of the migraine. "Reverting to my former ways?" Dirk queried softly. When Geoffrey's head snapped up, the brothers exchanged smiles. "No, they just happened to bring back a memory that was rather painful," Dirk replied, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. "They suggested a particular flowering vine for the walls of the castle that Mree--" Dirk stumbled over the name, "<u>she</u> was quite fond of."

Geoffrey regarded his brother thoughtfully. Dirk had told Geoffrey how his transformation had come about and Mreelynd's involvement in it. He hadn't told his brother how they had felt about each other, but Geoffrey had surmised that the two had fallen in love. But Dirk had told Geoffrey that Mreelynd had run away from him and would have nothing to do with him.

The more he thought, the more a plan crystallized in Geoffrey's mind. "So what about the seal of Blackpool?" he asked. Dirk's eyes cracked open to look at his brother coolly. Geoffrey pressed on, "Don't you like the falcon? <u>I</u> thought it was a great idea...much better than the spider...don't you think?...I mean--"

"Geoffrey!" Dirk interrupted sharply and then winced as his head throbbed painfully. Softening his tone, he continued, "Yes, I love your idea...the falcon is much better than the spider...but, my head is killing me. I'm going to lay down for a while, before we leave for Erik and Ariel's wedding." Sighing, Dirk stood up and looked at his brother. "It's hard to believe it's been a year since..." Dirk trailed off, shaking his head and exiting the room.

'A year since you saw Mreelynd?' Geoffrey thought. Reaching for parchment and pen, Geoffrey began scratching a message--a message that he hoped would change his brother's life.

****

Erik and Ariel were married with all the pomp, fanfare, glitter and noise appropriate to a royal wedding. The wedding

ball after the ceremony threatened to overflow Baaldorf Castle. Anyone who was anybody was there.

Dirk stood in the shadow, watching the colorful party-goers whirl past. He was dressed in dark blue; the new Blackpool falcon was emblazoned on his light weight ceremonial breastplate. Geoffrey found him leaning against the wall and pulled him into the garden.

"Dirk, I need to talk to you," Geoffrey whispered urgently. "But not here," he continued, pulling insistently at his brother's arm.

"Geoffrey, can't we talk here?" demanded Dirk, pulling free of his brother.

Geoffrey turned and sputtered, "Ah, no, I mean, there's something I want to show you...yeah,that's it! There's something I'd like to adapt for our castle, but I want you to see it first, so..."

"Geoffrey! You're babbling!" Dirk exclaimed, rounding on his brother. "What do you want me to see?!?"

"Me," a soft voice spoke behind Dirk.

Dirk stiffened as he recognized the voice. Turning slowly, he regarded the figure standing there. The gossamer shawl he had bought at the fair, glowed faintly in the moonlight. The face above the shawl was smiling shyly.

"Mreelynd?" Dirk breathed, not daring to move lest the apparition before him disappear. "Are you real?"

She laughed softly, "Yes, I'm real. I came to tell you I was wrong."

"About what?" Dirk asked uncertainly.

"About thinking I misjudged you," Mreelynd answered. "You <u>are</u> a good man."

"I wish I could say I did it just for you, but I did it for my people," Dirk said sadly.

"I know, I know. You wouldn't be a good king if you did it for just one person," Mreelynd agreed, stepping closer. "I just wanted to tell you I was wrong, and...and that I love you," she added softly.

"Really?" Dirk exclaimed, his face brightening.

Taking one step forward, he opened his arms and Mreelynd flew into them. Whirling her around, he proceeded to mumble into her hair that he loved her, worshipped her and adored her.

Setting her down at last, he gazed wonderingly at her upturned face. "Are you really here?" Dirk asked, caressing her cheek.

Mreelynd laughed and threw her arms about his neck. "I'm real, I'm here, and I'm staying!"

The sound of the happy couple's laughter floated into the air to join with the chuckle of a certain cantankerous old female wizard who was extremely pleased the truth had finally triumphed.

WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

It was a bit ironic that the store hours would be shortest when the nights were longest, but those were the breaks, Fauna thought. There were drawbacks to only working after dark, especially in a field such as the retail sale of collectibles. There usually weren't a lot of customers clamoring for Dept. 56 cottages at 9:00 p.m. on a winter's evening, but she did what she could to boost sales. She usually managed to sell something to each of the few people that came in.

The clang of the bell over the door pulled Fauna's thoughts to the present. Oh great, she groaned mentally, four people, all plastered. Obviously they were killing time before a dinner reservation, and there wasn't much chance of them buying anything. Most people didn't want to have to carry a package around all night.

"How are you all doing this evening?" she asked them, pasting on a salesperson's smile. She collected in return two glances, one head turned away, and one grin. For answers she got back a grunt, a mumbled "Fine", total silence, and a "How are you, babe?" Not a lot of promise, but the one that was ignoring her was beginning to annoy her seriously. "Acknowledge my presence, bitch," Fauna thought, "and I'll leave you alone to your browsing."

The one woman was determined to ignore her. Fauna knew the type well, and knew that if she managed to corner the woman face to face to ask a friendly "How're ya' doing?", she'd get a glacial response. The ice queen obviously thought "I'm just looking" was a state of health.

Unfortunately, Fauna was not in a good mood. Instead of being in a proper the-customer-is-always-right frame of mind, she was considering seriously the possibility of slamming the woman against the wall; but she was more than mature enough to channel her aggression in a positive manner. She kept her eyes on the woman, waiting for anything that she could use as an opening.

Eventually, one came, and in as thoroughly obnoxious a manner as possible.

The targeted woman had kept quiet while the party looked at the Tom Clark gnomes, the David Winter cottages, and all the collectible plates, but eventually they all moved over to the Lowell Davis display of farm animal figurines.

"Oh, look at the dog! Isn't it cute?" the murmuring, glancing woman said. "Oh, wait, what's it got on?"

"I get it," the happy drunk said. "It's not a dog, it's a wolf, wearing a sheepskin."

"How much is that? What overpriced crap!" the bitch stated.

Fauna came around from behind the counter and approached the group, swinging the keys to the display case.

"Aren't those neat? The artist is from the Carthage, Missouri area, where Sam Butcher is from, too. You know, the artist that created Precious Moments?" Fauna was smiling, waving towards various displays mentioned, being as disarming as possible. "And some of the Davis stuff is so funny."

The obnoxious woman finally turned toward her to glare. Fauna stared back.

"The wolf is my favorite," Fauna continued, locking her gaze on the woman.

"That is..."

"So funny, isn't it?"

Neither woman was looking at the display case. The bitch's companions had drifted off and were looking at other things in the store, oblivious to the interchange. Fauna pressed the issue.

"You'd like to buy it, wouldn't you?" she insisted, her sight focused on the woman's glazing eyes, her hearing zeroed in on the woman's heartbeat.

"I'd like...th-thump, th-thump, th-thump," Fauna heard. "I'd like to buy...th-thump, th-thump, th-thump."

"I'll get the box," Fauna said. "Will that be cash, check, or charge?"

"It'll be...th-thump, th-thump, th-thump...charge."

"Good." Fauna smiled, briefly. "I'm sure you'll treasure it always."

Th-thump, th-thump, th-thump.

High-pressure sales tactics or not, Fauna's customers were always satisfied customers.

APPLAUSE FOR LIFE
by Jill Lundberg

The applause was like a drug. He couldn't get enough. He needed it to replace the other drug in his life. Performing had given him a taste of freedom he hadn't known in a long time. Now, if he could only get rid of that other taste that permeated every part of his being.

He often fantasized about what it would be like to be rid of that taste altogether, to be free from the fear of its overpowering presence, its influence over every part of his life. To live as a normal man, once again. He often wondered what his reaction would be to a day on the beach, the sun shining on his face, watching children frolic in the water as the waves washed up and down the shore. If he got his wish he could take Marie out on a date, wine and dine her, turn the charm on full force, and who knows where the evening might lead.

DAMN! His thoughts always came around to this, the one thing he could never have. For her sake, he would continue to play the big brother role and keep his anguish inside.

Sometimes, the loneliness overwhelmed him and he went searching for his 'brothers' and 'sisters', knowing he would regret the decision in the morning. But when he was with them, he could relax and let his guard down, knowing he was with – well, not exactly friends – but at least those who understood and even encouraged his behavior. At these times, he saw how easy it would be to just stay among them forever. To make their life, his life. To live in comfort without the fear and agony that colored his every waking moment. He could almost convince himself that this was the road to travel, that he had had enough suffering in this long, drawn out existence.

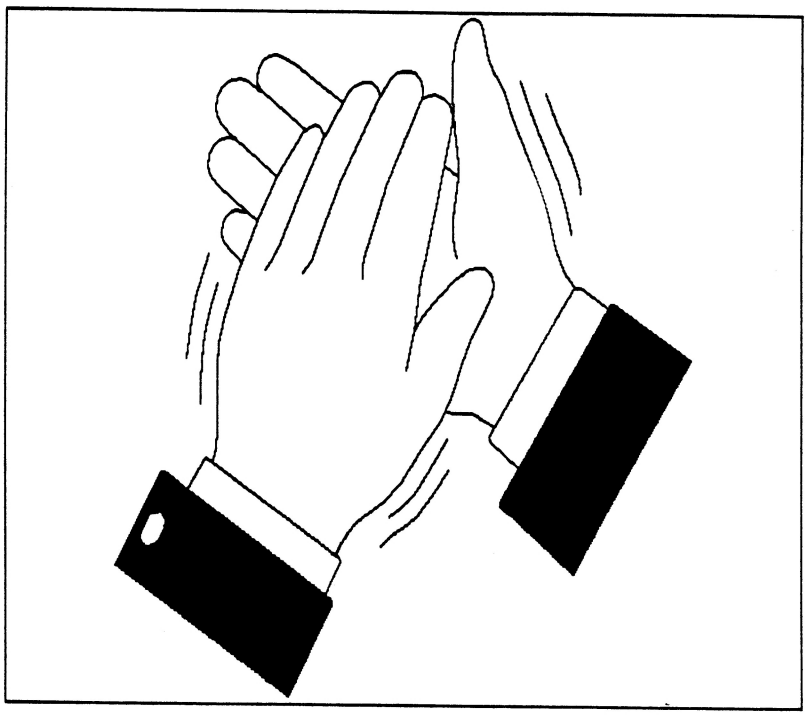
The shouts of encore!, encore! brought him back to the present for a moment and reminded him why he chose this path in life. And he liked to call it life despite the obvious flaws in his nature. He experienced the joy of his accomplishments and the time he spent with his friends – true friends, who liked him for who he was now (or at least for who they thought he was). And he felt sorrow when one of them passed away, as had happened too many times in his long life. He could be content with his life now – he had a job he enjoyed, friends he could depend on (what a difference that makes), and a girlfriend waiting in the wings.

Well, the last bit wasn't quite true. He knew he could never be close to her, but somehow he couldn't give her up. She didn't know what he was or what he was trying to be, just that he was wrestling with an inner torment almost too much to bear. She gave him quiet encouragement to keep on struggling – that extra pat on the back, or words of praise to keep him on the right track. Her faith in him gave him the strength to keep the monster at bay one more day.

Someday he would conquer this demon and step into the light, but for now he would go on living in the darkness, cursed by the evil hunger.

****

The curtain parted as he stepped back out onto the stage. It was a lovely clear night with the stars shining all about. How wonderful it was to view the night with joy and happiness instead of fear and dread. The applause engulfed his soul and pushed all the demons down into the dark recesses of his mind, to be forgotten until the craving grew and took over his body once again.



PICARD IN HELL

by

Hunter Dunn

She was beginning to regret ever having investigated that crash. Not that---may she be forgiven---she would ever wish death on another sentient, but this one was definitely getting to be annoying. She craned her neck upward, the many facets of her eyes focusing on him. Idiot. Standing up on a hilltop, and in the wind, no less. She reached up, gently locked a claw around its soft arm and tugged it down. It crouched next to her, not protesting for once.

Tckchld, this one was old. All its cilia had worn off. Its eyes were down to one facet each. And it babbled. *K'zha*, how it babbled. Baby noises. But then, it wasn't one of her own.

And there it was again, tapping the totem on its chest, reciting its prayer: "Picard to Enterprise, Enterprise, come in." The recitation was becoming familiar. She echoed it imperfectly: "Pitcarz to Entertprizt. Entertprizt com int."

The lids over its single facets widened. Her cilia tasted its surprise. At least, she assumed it was surprise. How could she be sure? How could any decent being be sure about anything where space travelers were concerned?

The old creature was still staring at her. Poor thing. Most of the vision was gone from its remaining facet. The whiteness circling the black center testified to this. And as for that hazel circle around the black---this could only be a sign of some illness of its age.

And still it stared at her. "Picard," it said, touching its chest. She stared in return. "Picard," it repeated, again indicating its chest. Then it pointed at her. Obligingly she repeated, "Pitcarz" and tapped her torso exoskeleton with one claw. The old creature shook its head again and repeated the whole process, but the wind had stopped and she wanted to travel. With the taste of the old one's frustration on her cilia, she stood and began to walk. She had a long way to go. It followed, of course. She would have been surprised if it hadn't.

It kept up well for its age. She admitted to herself some amazement that it could walk at all. Two legs were surely not as good as six, but they looked like strong legs, and it kept a smooth gait. It was remarkable the way all its muscles were on the outside. A very dangerous way to build a person. Yet it was not for her to judge the Creator's will.

Some people did not like this part of her planet and refused to even taste its fierce air. She found it exhilarating. The flame geysers were wildly beautiful. And what did it matter if the sulfur pits could suck you under in a relentless, smooth gulp? Any child could tell where they were. No, she preferred this landscape to the simple, challengeless forests. Green, green, always green. This place was better, more exciting in its colors---red and yellow, and the flickering white-blue of a

geyser bed. And then there was the slipperiness of the dunes, as if every grain of sand was waiting to tumble you down into a sulfur pit. This was life at life's best. A challenge, the conflict of the intelligent against the impervious. She would win. She always did. But 'always' had never included this ancient creature.

It made strange noises as it walked, a steady, puffing-type sound. In fact, it had three openings on its face. Sound came out of one, and that one had no trace of a vibrating tendril; just a rather short tongue. The other two, well, the Creator only knew what the other two were for. Perhaps they had something to do with that peculiar puffing.

On they went. Often the poor creature turned its head from side to side, obviously trying to make up for its lack of facets. How could it see anything at all? She almost felt sorry for it, stupid thing.

All her facets were still in fine order. She could observe what was ahead, above, below and behind them without a move. While she carefully picked her way around sulfur pit, she watched the space sentient with her. What were those funny shreds of paper which covered it? The red and black stuff was actually thicker and softer than paper; she'd inspected the substance while the creature was still sleeping at the crash site. Why would it wear such stuff? Perhaps it was ceremonial or religious in nature. Perhaps it was simply a way to hold on the totem it tapped so regularly. Well, whatever the reason, there were speakers at the hive-home who might be able to communicate with the creature.

When it was walking quietly with her, she found her speculations about the sentient to be quite entertaining. The way it moved was amazing enough. It almost never used its short forelegs for walking. Why did it have them? Why was the creature dry when they began walking and why was it covered with that thin film of moisture now? Why was it always brushing a foreleg across its eyes? Being so blind, the strain of looking around was probably painful.

A fire geyser bed flickered blue flames just ahead of them. The old one stopped to survey it, as did she. Her multi-faceted eyes took in the situation at one glance, but the space traveler had to turn its head from side to side. Then, with one of its many soft, short talons, it pointed to the only available path. She clicked in surprise. It wasn't so stupid after all. Had it gotten used to its blindness? Together they walked around the geyser, enjoying the heat of the quiet bed fire. She noted, however, that the old one was covered with more moisture than before.

The next half mile was a straight walk with nothing treacherous to occupy her thoughts. This space sentient was interesting indeed. She contemplated whether the creature's race was so cruel as to send it to her world to die just because it was old. The traveler took long strides with its two legs. Old but strong, she decided. Perhaps it did not die at its appointed time and was holding needed space in its hive-home. That would be a reason to send it out; a ceremonial forth-sending with paper

decorations and a totem. That was undoubtedly it. She felt quite, quite pleased with herself.

*****

The kilometer that lay before them was blessedly empty. Picard, his insectoid companion beside him, started across the small plain. The crash had left him shaken and bruised, though generally unhurt. The supplies were intact: food and a canteen of water. God knows he didn't need a blanket.

His companion did not seem to mind the heat, but Picard's experience one-on-one with insectoids was limited. Worse yet, his attempts at communication with it had been a failure.

They were half a kilometer into the plain when Picard realized the creature was looking at him---hard to tell since its eyes had so many facets. The being seemed to be as interested in him as he was in it. It did not mind him tagging along, going...going where? Out of this sulfurish hell, he hoped. Picard knew for a fact that not all this planet was like this. Mugarwa Prime had been surveyed a century and a half before Picard's accidental arrival. It contained temperate forests over much of the land masses, but Picard had unfortunately crashed near the equator.

One hundred and fifty years earlier Starfleet had discovered this world and observed it carefully, finally announcing that the inhabitants were unaware of life in the stars. "Equivalent of Earth, mid-nineteenth century" the report proclaimed. Picard was hoping they'd advanced some since them. Whatever their level of technology, Picard would undoubtedly be a shock to them. How much of a shock depended on their intelligence and Picard's luck. He had no desire to end up a guest in a zoo. Or worse yet, a stuffed specimen in a museum.

Yet here he was, traveling with one of the natives. His companion was female and young, if memory served him correctly. Well, as long as she remained patient, things might turn out favorably.

As if with one thought, Picard and his companion stopped. The landscape ahead looked amazingly like that of Mars. Red dust and red rocks as far as the eye could see. "Thank God for a decent atmosphere," Picard muttered. The female's eyes twinkled at him.

Walking side by side was not easy. Come to think of it, walking itself was not easy. Picard carefully picked his way through the rock-strewn land. The insectoid was having a worse time. For every one time Picard stumbled, she fell three.

Exhaustion nibbled at his muscles. The heat was nearly unbearable and the landscape was maddening. Was it his imagination, or did his companion look tired as well? She took one step forward with two of her left legs, tottered and fell.

With a sudden rumble and hiss, a steam geyser erupted directly in front of her. Panicked, she tried to scramble back, but her legs kicked uselessly at the sand, barely keeping her from tumbling into the rapidly forming crater. Picard leapt quickly, grabbed her hind legs and pulled hard, hoping

desperately that this particular species was not one that would lose its legs when met with such an action. He had a gruesome vision of this. More horrible was the vision of what would happen if he failed to get her out of the geyser's spray.

Her legs held. She struggled with her front legs, her head reared back as far as it would go. Damn, she was heavy. Picard could see that the geyser had scorched her head and the upper part of her thorax.

With one final tug, Picard yanked her out of the geyser's way. The effort sent him tumbling backward. He felt a sharp stab in the side of his head. Gasping, his last view was of the insectoid on her back, all six legs trembling in the air.

*****

When the sun screamed back into his consciousness, Picard found himself lying on his back. Something sticky dribbled out of his mouth, something salty and metallic. Blood. He tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness washed him back to the ground. More blood slid into his eyes. He wiped it away and focused on the world around him. The insectoid's eyes glittered at him from an arm's length away.

Picard cleared his throat. "I seem to be injured."

Crouching down, the creature regarded him. Then with the claws of two forelegs, she held him around the arms and pulled him into a sitting position. It was not comfortable. Through his pain, Picard noticed that his companion's head and the top part of its thorax were definitely scorched. He wondered if she was in as much pain as he was.

With her middle left leg, she reached for Picard's canteen, still slung over his shoulder. Maneuvering it into position, she opened it with her front right leg and lifted it to his lips. He got the message and drank, but only sparingly. This seemed to satisfy her. She closed the canteen, lowered it and regarded Picard with every facet of her eyes.

"Thank you," he said

But the alien was not satisfied. With a delicate foreclaw, she scooped a drop of Picard's blood and brought it to her face. "She's smelling it," Picard thought. He wondered if she understood just what blood was. With painstaking care she moved next to him, took his head between her foreclaws, bent over him and licked his head wound.

The first touch of the alien's tongue sent a shock of pain through Picard. The second lick was like acid. The third lick paralyzed him and he felt nothing, then saw nothing, then heard nothing. A moment later he cared nothing, and the oblivious universe crushed him like a flea.

*****

Pain shrieked through his head. A giant ant was staring at him, an expression of curiosity on its triangular face. "Mon Dieu," Picard rasped. "Je suis..." But what was he feeling?

More importantly, what was he seeing? A halo of vivid colors radiated from the insectoid.

"Well?" she said.

"What?" Picard answered.

"How do you feel?" she said, using a clawed front leg to brush away the colors. "Nasty things," she commented. "Really quite an annoyance." The halo broke into segments, then rolled into balls and danced around her head. She eyed Picard. "And you are...?"

Picard blinked. The balls of light giggled.

"Come, come," the ant said impatiently. "You've got to answer some question sometime. Now hurry up." She teetered into a standing position. "You are coming, aren't you? By the way, what's your name?"

"Picard, Jean-Luc Picard." He got to his feet, a process that had suddenly become quite difficult.

"Four names, hmm? How interesting. I only have one." The balls of light formed into a halo once again.

"What is it?"

"What is what?"

"Your name. What is your name?"

"Mephistopheles."

In all her haloed glory, Mephistopheles toddled ahead of him, then stopped and looked back. Taking her cue, Picard started after her. The sky was becoming a frightening shade of purple as Mephistopheles swatted at her halo, causing it to break into giggling stars. Some of them trailed back to tickle Picard's nose. He scratched at it, then pulled back his hand at the scent of blood. His hand was scraped. The stars twirled around his hand in sparkling sympathy. Were they actually cooing at him? He shook his head. It was a mistake of galactic proportions.

*****

On they journeyed. Mephistopheles, Picard discovered, babbled. She had apparently been waiting for centuries to have some conversation, one-sided though most of it was.

"So," she smiled. "Just how much do you think your soul's worth? We were voting on that just before I came here."

"I hadn't really thought about it."

"No? Just like a human. The Klingons think about it all the time. Warrior's honor. Stuff like that."

"Stuff like that," tittered the little balls of light. Picard swatted at one, but it darted away easily, then came back to hover near his eyes.

"Better think fast. You're in hell already."

"So this is hell," Picard said. How odd. It was just the way he'd heard it would be. After a moment's consideration, he asked, "What level?"

"Mezzanine." Mephistopheles laughed so hard, she fell sideways onto her back and kicked her legs in the air. "Mezzanine! Get it? Dante always thought that one was hysterical. Mezzanine!" Mephistopheles' laughter dissolved into

a sigh. Her legs folded neatly together and she lay still. "Um, Picard, could you give me a push? I'm stuck."

Somewhat annoyed, and with a vicious pain throbbing in his head, Picard grabbed two of her right legs and rolled her onto her left side, then stood back. She struggled for a moment. "No, not enough," she announced. Picard circled round to her back, grabbed and lifted her slightly. Her exoskeleton was smooth and hot. She was on her feet in an instant. Without a word of thanks, she went on her way, Picard trailing behind.

"Isn't hell a great place? Keeps you nice and warm. Wouldn't you like to stay?"

Picard caught up with the insectoid, looked her straight in at least twelve of her facets and announced, "I have no intention of staying here."

"Fussy, Picard, fussy. Q was right. You're stuffy, too."

"You know Q?"

"Everybody in hell knows Q. He's a great guy." A smile appeared on the insectoid's face. "He's the one who came up with the mezzanine joke."

"It figures."

"Stop grumbling and answer the question."

Picard wiped at the sweat and blood on his brow. "What was the question?"

Mephistopheles stopped and turned her entire head to face him. "WHERE DO YOU WANT TO STAY IN HELL?" she shouted.

Picard put his hands on his hips. "Nowhere, thank you. I am leaving."

She lifted her two front legs and waved them at him. "That's what you think."

"I am definitely leaving, with or without your help."

"You're a dweeb, Picard, a first-year cadet, a grape without the sense to stay on the vine. If you'd stayed in France, you wouldn't have these problems."

"Shut up and walk."

"Walk! Walk!" the balls of light giggled. They flew clumsy formations around Picard's head. Picard ignored them and lead the way. Mephistopheles staggered after him. They traveled in silence.

After five minutes or so, Picard heard her call in a sing-song voice, "Jean-Lu-uc, it's this way."

"Why should I listen to you?" he growled back.

Mephistopheles hurried to walk beside him and ended up with two feet in a pothole. "Because I'm the only chance you have."

Picard laughed.

"All right then, we'll make it a game. You go the way you think is out of hell, and I'll do my best to lead you further in. What do you say?"

Picard did not answer.

"Marvelous!" Mephistopheles exulted. "I'll win, of course."

Picard ignored her and continued on the same heading, accompanied by Mephistopheles' eternal laughter.

*****

The mirage of trees shimmered with the same light as the halo around Mephistopheles' head. Mephistopheles simply laughed. "You don't believe that's real, do you? It's the heat, nothing more."

"It means," Picard stated, "that somewhere around here there are trees. He stopped and glared at her. "And you are going to take me there."

"Shut up and drink some water." Mephistopheles reached for Picard's canteen.

"No, thank you," he grumbled. But his hands shook so badly he could not even hold the canteen, much less open it. With a harrumph, Mephistopheles took the canteen from him, opened it and helped him tilt it to his lips. Picard did not object.

Grass and trees. The water revived him and gave him a better view. Picard rubbed his eyes and the forest remained. "It's not a mirage. It's real. There is a way out of hell." He stumbled.

"Careful, careful," Mephistopheles called. "It's not what you think it is. Don't rush."

Picard paid no heed. He hurried over stones and past boulders.

"Not so fast," Mephistopheles called. "Wait a minute! If you keep behaving like this, I'll never tell your crew that we've known about you for ages." Then she called more anxiously, "You can't leave! You can't leave!" But Picard raced on. The trees were clearer now. Brush led to grass, which led to trees. He had to get there. Had to. Mephistopheles' voice turned to clicking and chattering. "Pitcarz to Entertprizt!" Mephistopheles called. "Pitcarz to Entertprizt!"

Nearly there. Nearly there. But night crushed him to the ground, to the grass. The heat of hell seared his brain. Mephistopheles had won.

*****

When Picard awoke, there was a loud buzzing in his head and his vision was blurred into an oval of white surrounded by red. "Jean-Luc," the blur said. "Jean-Luc, can you hear me?"

"Beverly?" he tried to say, but the word was slurred.

"Lie still." There was the hiss of a hypospray. Picard heard it more than felt it.

The blur shimmered, wavered and resolved itself into the face of Beverly Crusher. He tried to stretch his hand to her, but his hand would not obey the command.

"Don't try to move, Jean-Luc. There's still too much of the chemical in your system." She smiled. "You have no idea how worried we've been. If I weren't for the Chtechrr, we'd never have found you. No, don't try to talk. Just rest. We'll take you home."

She turned to the side and nodded. A moment later, the universe-eating tingle of the transporter took hold of him. The familiar feel of rematerialization prickled through him. The light told him he was on board the <u>Enterprise</u>. Hands grasped him at the shoulders, the legs, the feet. Cool hands steadied his

head as he was lifted. By the time he was placed on the trolley, he was unconscious again.

*****

The sounds of sickbay came gently into his awareness: the soft computer beeps, the shuffle of footsteps on the carpet, the hushed voices. Picard opened his eyes to find he was on one of the side beds, the overhead lights dimmed. Across the room doctors Selar and Crusher were conferring. The tall Vulcan nodded once and exited, leaving the CMO to stand by a computer panel.

His voice was rough, croaking. Even he barely heard it. But to the anxious CMO it was a trumpet call. She was at his side in an instant, medical instruments in hand. "At last," she smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Dry," he whispered. A moment later she was supporting his head, helping him drink from a glass of blissfully cool water. Picard looked up at her. Had she ever been as beautiful as she was at this moment? "How long?" he asked when the glass was put aside.

"You missed the rendezvous with us a week ago. According to Chkchr, that was about the time you crashed."

"Chkchr?"

"The Chtechrr you've been traveling with."

"*Mephistopheles*."

"Jean-Luc?"

"I'm fine. I believe Chkchr is a young female."

Beverly nodded. "She seemed quite impressed by you, though she thought she'd killed you by cleaning your wound."

Picard arched an eyebrow. "How close did she come?"

"A little too close." Beverly pursed her lips. "We arrived three days ago and found the shuttle. Shortly afterward, Chkchr and some others arrived at the site. There was some confusion at first, but once we got a Universal Translator on line, things straightened out pretty quickly."

"The Prime Directive---" Picard began, but was interrupted by the doors hissing open. Will Riker entered the room and, seeing his captain awake, grinned broadly. "How are you, sir?"

"Fine, thank you. Will---"

"What do you say, Doctor?" Riker looked to Crusher for confirmation.

She nodded. "He just needs a little more rest and a lot more water." She picked up the empty glass on the bedstand. "I'll go get some. Now remember," she tilted the glass toward Picard as if waving her index finger. "If you sit up too quickly, you'll regret it. You're still dehydrated." She left the room.

Riker turned back to face Picard. "Would you like a report, sir?"

Picard nodded and found he did indeed regret it. Lying down would have to do. When he again focused on Riker, he found his first officer watching him with a look of concern. Picard lifted his hand as if to brush Riker's worry aside. "Dr. Crusher tells

me that you met with some of the Chtechrr at the site of the shuttle crash. Will, the Prime Directive---"

"Nothing to worry about in this case, sir. It turns out the Chtechrr have known of the existence of space travelers for a long time. They've been tapping into our open subspace radio communiques for over a century. They even," he smiled, "considered us rude for not coming down to visit. They want to open relations with the Federation, providing we come to them."

"Amazing," Picard murmured. "Mephistopheles said..."

"Sir?" The concern on Riker's face was deep.

"It's alright, Will. When Chkchr cleaned my wound, I began to hallucinate. I thought Chkchr was Mephistopheles and..." Picard notice Riker's puzzled, troubled look. "Never mind, Will."

He was rescued by Beverly's timely entrance. The water was sweet, soothing his fiery throat.

Riker waited till Picard was finished drinking, then finished his report. "I've contacted Starfleet. Diplomats are on their way. "And with you recovered---"

"*Nearly* recovered," Crusher reminded them.

"Things will be back to normal."

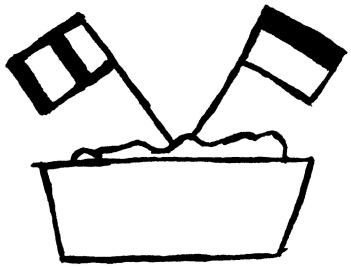
"Except for the shuttlecraft."

"Oh, that," Riker's eyes sparkled. "Starfleet says they won't take that wrecked shuttle out of your salary if you promise not to do it again."

"Good. I'm still paying off the *Stargazer*."

And for just a moment, it looked almost as if Riker believed him.

Theories on how the Bajorans knew Odo was an infant creature.



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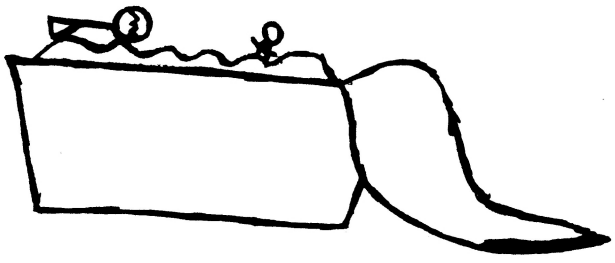
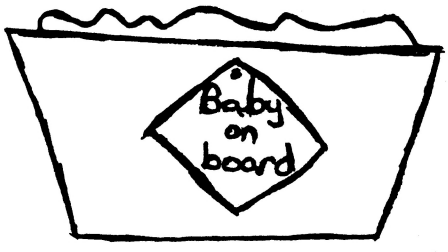




ARRANGEMENTS OF SHADOWS

by Kathy Keetch

Someone was intruding on his darkness. True, the tall figure in the top hat was in the nimbus shed by the streetlamp; but it was after midnight. The streets, like all of Paris at night, belonged to him, and he resented the intrusion. The question was, should he deal with the man, or should he wait and see if the man would leave on his own volition?

The horse drawing his carriage snorted, annoyed plumes of frosty breath fanning out and disappearing into the jet clarity of the first cold night of this autumn of 1887. The driver, at least, knew better than to express an opinion on his actions or ~~his~~ inactions. He could be a generous patron if he was obeyed. The driver didn't want to consider what would happen if he wasn't obeyed.

The intruder hadn't moved except to circle the lamp post. He didn't seem to be waiting for anyone, because he wasn't peering down the street, nor had the reacted when the horse had made the carriage's presence clear. In fact, the man seemed to be staring at the light itself, at the flare of the gas jets, absentmindedly scratching at his chest as he cocked his head to take in all the details of the glow it shed against the darkness.

As he watched the figure by the streetlamp, his irritation gave way to curiosity and amusement. Perhaps, he thought, the man was an escaped lunatic, though lunatics seldom dressed with the air of moderateness the figure was displaying. He, himself, was still in full evening dress, having come from the Opera. He had taken his carriage into the streets, away from the Opera, hoping to forget the banalities of the evening's performance, and, he suddenly thought, perhaps the capers of this man could refocus his mind. Yes, he decided, some conversation with a solid, if rather demented, bourgeoisie, such as this man appeared to be, could purge his memory of the cacophony that had tonight been masquerading as music. A little amusement, then, and he could return refreshed, to take up once more the Olympian task of his own work.

He descended from his carriage and strode towards the figure. The man did not turn towards him. He halted at the edge of the light's circle.

"Good evening, Monsieur," he said pleasantly. "May I ask if you are a visitor to Paris?"

The man gave a start, then turned to acknowledge his

greeting. "And to you. No, I'm from Paris. Why do you ask, do I seem lost?"

Seen this near, the man was even more respectable looking than he'd seemed at a distance. He was young, probably in his late twenties, and could be called handsome, with regular features, a good head of hair, and a well-kept beard.

He hated the sight of the intruder immediately.

"No, no," he assured smoothly, like ripples over a river's shoals. "I merely ask because, even though Paris is called the 'City of Lights', few people take such a deep interest in its lampposts."

The man glanced at him, puzzled, then looked back at the lamp. "I wasn't looking at the post, I was looking at the light."

"The light?"

"Yes, the light, the color and the light, the brightness meeting and blending into the dark, lines above the horizontal expanding up and out into warm, luminous cheer, calmness streaming out horizontally, and the cold sadness of the downward moving lines." As he spoke, the man began to lose his quiet demeanor, gaining animation in his voice and face. "Look at it, the white/blue/purple flaring out into the yellow/orange/red, then fading to the yellow/green/back-to-blue as it meets the brown/purple/blue of the night."

He began to be intrigued. If the man was a lunatic, he was at least an artistic lunatic, standing there in the cold pointing at invisible divisions in colors of light.

"But sure, monsieur, the light is not that easily defined, is it? A gas lamp is scarcely like a prism, which can split pure light into the colors of the rainbow."

"Then what is it?" the man asked, stopped in his enthusiastic spate. He lowered his pointing finger and, knuckling his hand, rubbed at his greatcoat, under the top button. "What else is a gas lamp, is anything, but a spectrum of differing colors, merging into arrangements of light and shadow?"

"Perhaps it is an illusion, monsieur, like to much else in life; indeed, like life itself." He moved further into the light, unable to let an entrance line such as that slip past, and waited expectantly for a reaction as the man was given a chance to see his face clearly. He was rewarded with a grimace as the man rubbed at his chest again.

"You speak of illusion," the man answered, "as indeed I suppose you must be familiar with it. Do you by any chance work in the theater?"

"In a sense, I do." He was amused at the question. "I'm composing a work for the Opera."

"Really?" The man did not seem impressed.

"Ah. You think I'm writing one of those five-act carbuncles that gush putrid sermons or gangrenous witticisms in cripple choruses and squalling arias?" he asked sweetly.

The man shuffled uncomfortably, scratching again.

"Is your bourgeois soul offended at my attitude towards the Opera?" he inquired, kindly.

"I'm a little surprised," the man admitted, glancing not at his face but at his faultless attire.

"Are you so conventional then, that you cannot conceive of anyone stepping outside the bounds of established art, to something unique, of his own genius?" The kind facade was slipping to a sneer.

"Genius? I can't say that," the man began. "About myself, I mean," he added quickly, seeing the spark of rage in his questioner's eyes. "But I do understand wanting to step outside of the established norm, to get through to something new. I'm an artist, and I want to find a kind of painting that's all my own." He was kindling into life again. "That's why I study the light."

"So? A fellow genius. We should become acquainted. I'm called Erik," he said, extending his hand.

The man looked surprised at only being given a personal name, but he stopped scratching long enough to take the cold hand extended to him. "Georges." He flinched as he shook Erik's hand.

"Tell me, my friend," Erik began as Georges once again rubbed at his chest. He wanted to ask nastily if Georges had fleas, but there was something he wanted to know more. "I see now, knowing that you're an artist, why the concept of light and illusion would be important. But I am curious as to how you decided I was familiar with them. Why," he suddenly demanded, "did you think I worked in the theater?"

George shivered, not just from the increasing cold of the

night. "I thought you were familiar with the illusions of making up."

"Why do you say that?" Erik snapped, his voice as frigid as the night.

"Because you're wearing an artificial nose," the man answered, shrugging, then grimacing again.

"Yes," he purred. "I do. Would you like to know why? Because I would go in respectable society, because I would pass through their bourgeoisie ranks with them being none the wise that Death had walked among them, leaving them with their lives and only the unease of the buried primitive in them to tell them how close they had come to meeting Death face-to-face!"

He howled the last words, reaching up and ripping away the construction that gave him at least a semblance of near normality. Without it, with the gaping hole where his nose had never grown, his resemblance to a skull was uncanny, with taut, yellow skin like parchment drawn over his bones and eyes burning far back in huge sockets, thin lips drawn back to reveal a corpse-like grin.

The response was more than gratifying, it was electric. The man clutched at his chest with both hands, gasping, and fell at the feet of the man known as the Phantom of the Opera, huddled on his side.

Erik bent over him, checking for a pulse in the throat. None. He straightened and looked down at him, smiling appreciatively. Then he began to frown, remembering how the man had been rubbing at his chest during their entire encounter. The man had obviously been having pains even before he'd seen the full awfulness of Erik's face. He would have probably dropped dead staring at the street light without any intervention, Erik realized, furious that once more this night his entertainment had degenerated into farce. Enraged, he lashed out, kicking the man that lay before him, catching him square on the breastbone, again and again.

And the man gasped once, then a second time, beginning a shuddering but steady breathing.

Shocked, Erik stopped his attack. He bent down again, this time to feel a thready but definite pulsing in the big vessels of the neck. The man was back from the dead.

Erik shouted for his carriage and, rolling the man on his back, began to hunt through his pockets. He had found a bundle of papers in one pocket by the time the carriage drew up. Erik held onto them and directed the driver to put the unconscious man

into the carriage. As the driver nervously complied, Erik thumbed through the papers, fuming. If Death wasn't going to oblige him by allowing him to be the end of the man, then Death was not going to be permitted any claim on Georges tonight. It was getting still colder, though, and he would need shelter from the pre-winter blasts that were beginning to whistle down the street with more force.

"Monsieur?" the driver asked anxiously.

"In a moment," Erik snapped. Drawings, notes, and a play bill were in the bundle, but no clue where the man lived. More drawings. Ah, a letter. Better, two letters, both opened and with the same address. Erik swung into the carriage, shouting the address to the driver. The carriage was moving as he shut the door, and it picked up speed as Erik checked his passenger, looking for keys to their destination. All the speed of hellfire wouldn't help him save this man if they couldn't get into shelter once they'd reached it, and Erik knew that familiar surroundings would be far better for the man than any hospitals to be found. No time could be wasted, though, for Georges' breathing was little better; and in the infrequent glimpses afforded by the streetlamps they were speeding past, his coloring was worse than Erik's. His pulse was steady, but weak, and he was beginning to shiver.

Erik cursed. He had laid his claim on this man's life, and he'd defy Satan himself to take it from him. The amoral cold of the coming winter, however, was more likely to gain the victory with the man's death than all the forces of evil amassed that night. The man needed the July sun more than he needed a priest.

The carriage rattled to a stop, and the driver leaped down.

"This is the place, monsieur," he said unnecessarily. Erik waved him away and dug again into the man's pockets, finding some keys finally.

"Try the doors," he ordered, throwing the keys to the driver. While he was being obeyed, he turned grimly to his passenger, pulling him out of the carriage and hoisting him over his shoulders. Georges' limbs dangled ludicrously, and Erik cursed again as he hauled him to the now-opened street door and up the staircase beyond. He could just hear the driver's fumblings at the door above, and he concentrated on not tripping over Georges' long arms.

"Well?" he rasped up the stairs.

There was a moment more of clinking as the driver fumbled at the lock before it clicked and the door creaked open.

"Monsieur?" the driver asked.

"Go keep the horse from straying," Erik ordered, shouldering past with his burden. "Or from being stolen," he added, although they had yet to meet another person. It must be very late, indeed, he mused, if all of Paris was asleep.

The driver clattered down the stairs, and as if in answer Georges shivered violently. Erik carried him gingerly through the door, grimly pleased that, since the keys had fit, he'd at least found the correct address. He shuffled slowly into the dark chamber, feeling for obstructions with one hand and his leading foot. He located a couch within meters of the door, and noted with his free hand that it was covered with the multiple layers of coverings in customary usage. Good, he thought, laying down his burden carefully and, by feel, pulling the covers down and around Georges. He searched for matches, accompanied by the castanets sound of Georges' teeth chattering. His eyes had begun adjusting to the dimness, and now he could just tell that there was a very little light, coming in through chinks in the covered skylights, confirming the thought that this was the artist's studio. Pity they didn't keep out the cold, he thought sourly, as he finally found matches and a lamp.

He struck a match, squinting in the sudden blossom of light. Steadying the small flame, he touched it to the wick of the lamp. As the lamp glowed into light, he shook out the match, picked up the lamp, and turned to check his patient.

And found himself staring into Summer.

Covering most of the back wall of the long studio was a painting, enormous in the confines of the room, two meters high and more than three meters long. It had a wide frame all around it, giving the illusion of a doorway he could step through, if he would, to join the throng of people promenading through a park. It was obviously a Sunday, he thought, looking at the leisured stances of the day of rest, and he thought he could even recognize the park from descriptions he'd read.

There was something wrong, though. It looked odd in the lamplight, the figures stiff, with multiple perspectives making it somehow look flat as at the same time it drew the eye back down a shoreline and through ranks of trees. It seemed, impossibly, perfectly balanced and also teetering on the edge of unreality. The park looked hot, shimmering in the sun, with welcome patches of dimness in the shade of the trees. It was only as he approached that the details began to blur, the colors wavering in the lamplight and breaking apart, the design disintegrating into specks of discrete colors instead of a blend of shading. Instead of the smooth, slick surface of an academy painting, Erik was

confronted with a surface of millions of dots of primary colors, all depending on the viewer's eyes to blend them into the multiple shades of a summer's day. Stunned, he had to concede that the man certainly had known what he was talking about when he had been raving about the light and dark and colors of the streetlamp.

Erik stepped back again, away from the dots, letting the flecks of light and dark blend themselves once more into people strolling through the trees of a small suburban park on an island in the river, on an ordinary Sunday.

He put the lamp down slowly, careful not to awaken Georges Seurat, who now seemed to be sleeping peacefully and easily in the warmth of a Sunday Afternoon on the Island of LaGrand Jatte.

KNIGHT RHYMES

There once was a coroner named Natalie,
For Nick's soul she often did battling.
She wanted him to eat
More than uncooked red meat,
But knew blood was his favorite recipe.

There was a policeman named Nick,
For whom drinking blood was a kick-
Though a vampire as well,
Made him in his own hell,
To do without blood made him sick.

Jeannette's drink was mixed blood and wine.
She liked more than grapes on a vine.
She preferred her drink pure,
Though 'twould seldom occur,
For mortals would always decline.

The evil one's name was La Croix.
He thought of mere mortals as toys.
He can't understand
Nick's love for this band,
Because killing them gives him such joy.

The Competition
by D. McCrimmon

He sat in his assigned place, waiting patiently. He had done his best, he knew he had. Shaking his dark head briskly, he scanned the competition.

Dark eyes rated and dismissed each opponent. He knew he only had one serious competitor, and he watched for an opportunity. When the prissy little prince looked his way, their eyes locked. "You cannot win (th-thump,th-thump,th-thump)...you know that you cannot win (th-thump,th-thump,th-thump)...you are NOT a winner (th-thump,th-thump,th-thump)..."

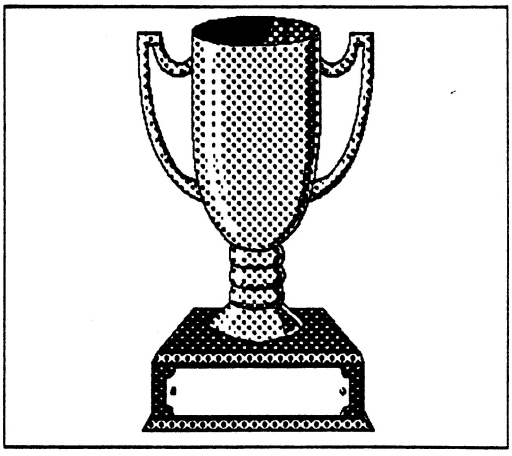
A man crossed between them and broke the eye contact. But it had been enough. The prissy prince was cowering and whining. Not a champion at all.

Over the loudspeaker, the announcer was proclaiming in stentorian tones the winner of the competition. A collective gasp rose from the crowd--an unexpected upset. His ears perked up as his name was called. Stepping out briskly with his partner, he stopped at the winner's circle to accept his trophy. And once again, the announcer proclaimed his triumph.

"...and the winner of the 144th annual Westminster Kennel Club competition is Laird Dickens, Lad of Glenlivet. Once again, top honors, best in show goes to Cairn Terrier #39, Champion Laird Dickens, Lad of Glenlivet."

Down on the floor of Madison Square Garden, Dickens sat surrounded by well-wishers. The prissy toy poodle slunk off to lick his wounds. Dickens grin grew wider, displaying long, white teeth. His tail thumped loudly against the floor as he looked up expectantly at his handler. One glance at him, and the wished-for treat was delivered. Dickens chewed the tidbit noisily.

Life was good. Best in Show. Not bad, for a vampire Cairn.



It's a Wonderful Life?
by Pat Mostly

Nick sat on the dome atop the CN communications tower. The night was silent. There was little traffic, no doubt due to the snowfall and the lateness of the hour. The Christmas lights cast odd shadows.

The hopeful and the hopeless waited together for the sunrise this Christmas Eve. Nick had no doubt which group he belonged to. Leaning against the top spire, he thought that only a few maintenance people and himself had ever enjoyed this view.

Not bothered by the cold or the rain, he drank from the bottle he had brought from his supply at the loft and looked down on the city that had been his latest home. And waited.

Nick had not come to this decision easily. He had waited many centuries to see a sunrise, and this morning his wish would come true. It would, of course, be the last thing he ever saw and he wondered how painful those last few seconds would be. He put such thoughts out of his mind however. This was the right thing to do. He was sure.

"Really? Are you really sure?"

Nick looked up and saw Schanke standing at the edge of the tower. "I must be hallucinating." He said out loud.

"Nope. It's me." Schanke said.

A sudden gust of wind came up and while Nick was unaffected, Schanke lost his balance and was swept off the side.

"Schanke!" Nick called out, throwing the bottle aside and launching himself off the tower after his partner.

He caught up with Schanke just as he was about to go splat on the snow-covered sidewalk.

"Schanke, how did you know where to find me?"

"The boss gave me explicit directions."

"Stonetree?"

"No, someone a little higher ranking than that."

"Schank, what do you mean?"

"I'm not Schanke. I'm your guardian angel. Call me ...Fred."

"Sure. Look Schank, let me take you to a hospital. The fall must have caused some damage."

"But if we leave now you'll miss that sunrise you've been wanting to see for, what is it, almost eight centuries."

Nick moved away from the man. I must be hallucinating, he thought. Schank did not know his true identity.

Looking around, Schanke, pulled the collar of his coat up, and said, "Looks like there's a squall brewing and it's shaping up to be a storm." With that the wind picked up again and the snow seemed to come down even harder. The clouds took on a darker tone.

"So you're my guardian angel, huh? I didn't know vampires had guardian angels. We are dead you know."

"Then we have something in common." The Schanke look alike told him.

Nick began to walk away but "Schanke" was relentless.

"Look, Nick I know that this might seem kind of hard to believe, but if vampires can exist, why not guardian angels? I

didn't know you guys had one of us, either, until I got this job. I even asked them to double check. Turns out you're one of the first. If it works out with you, who knows? Seems you've done enough good things to warrant one of us."

"I'm a killer!" Nick cried out.

"That doesn't necessarily rule out the possibility of redemption. Actually, I had my choice of assignments. Seems there's this other guy in town. Name's Matrix."

"He's a hitman," Nick said.

"Was a hitman," Schanke corrected. "Seems now he wants to go straight, kind of like you. But you haven't killed in centuries. He hasn't killed in months. You're a much better prospect. Much closer to being redeemed."

"I'm not a book of greenstamps." Nick yelled at Schanke. "Nor am I George Bailey."

"Fine, I'm not Clarence Oddbody. That goofball portrayal set our image back for years. I may have the faith of a child but I do not have the IQ of a rabbit."

"No, that would be insulting to the rabbit," Nick called out amazed at how easily he fell into the pattern of friendly banter with this stranger who had Schanke's face but who was not his partner.

Ignoring this insult, Fred continued, "Believe me, there won't be any wings for me if I pull this off, nor will any little silver bells ring. This is just business. The business of saving you."

"I saved you, remember?" Nick said, pointing up to the top of the tower.

"Oh, that. I had to get your attention. My appearing as your partner got just the right reaction. You had to save me.You couldn't help yourself. I had to get you out of your self righteous funk."

"Look, I've screwed people's lives up for centuries. Schanke, the real Schanke, reported my little run in with that bus and now he's suspended without pay awaiting the results of a psych exam. Do you believe it? Over fifty people have filed suit against the city claiming whiplash from the accident.

Internal affairs has been called in. They're going into every nook and cranny of my life. No matter how good Merlin is, not even his records can stand up to that kind of intense scrutiny. I can't stay and I won't run. So I'll just disappear. Literally."

"What about Natalie?" Schanke asked.

"She'd just be better off without me, that's all. I won't screw up her life anymore." Nick said dejectedly.

With a melodramatic air, Schanke went on, "Won't darken her door. Won't bring her down. Won't... well, you get the picture. Look, I didn't have to take this job. You're just a little discouraged and maybe a little suicidal. That Matrix guy is homicidal. Maybe I should have taken him. I like his tailor more,although you have a better hair dresser."

"Keep talking. The sun will be up soon and we can both be on our way."

"No, Nick, the sun won't rise until you and I have completed our business."

"When will that be?" Nick dug his hands into his pockets. This was a gesture he had picked up watching humans react over the centuries. The cold, of course, did not bother him. "When I see the error of my ways, see that life is worth living? When I express my gratitude to you from the bottom of my still heart and go on with this cursed existence? No thank you." Nick turned his back and walked away.

To himself, Schanke said, "Yep, Matrix looks better all the time, but we're locked in, amigo." He followed Nick and put his arm around the man. "This is bigger than both of us. If you are going to throw away God's greatest gift - yes, even you have the spark of life - you had better think very seriously about it. And I am here to conduct the review course. Life 101. Nick Knight, this is your life."

Baring his fangs, Nick turned on Schanke, grabbed the man by the shoulders and said, "Think about this!"

Baring his own fangs, Schanke hissed at Nick, "Think about this my friend!" In front of Nick's eyes the fangs disappeared. "How do you talk with those things extended, anyway? I spit all over myself."

"Centuries of practice," Nick said.

"Just get this straight from the get-go. I've read your file. The big one kept upstairs." He pointed up towards the sky,but Nick felt the place he was trying to indicate was much further than any star.

"There is nothing about you, no act, no thought, no desire, no dream, no fear, no anger, no hate, no kill that I do not know about. I know that you are a control freak, but you will not control this situation. I know and I understand. You may have a hard time believing this, but I am older than even you."

"I was born old," Nick said. "And it would have been better if I had died the true death in 1228."

"Now remember, you're the one who asked for it. So no complaining about reliving old movies." Schanke pointed a finger at Nick.

"Oh no," Nick whined.

"Yes, you died. You're dead. Have a happy afterlife. It's over. Kaput. Adios. I'm sorry Mrs. Knight, but your boy died honorably in battle. He will be missed by a grateful empire. The Crusades won't be the same without him." Schanke hesitated and looked up at Nick. "Or whatever they told the parents of the deceased in those days. I was doing a different kind of work then. Whatever they said I am sure that your family was so proud."

Suddenly Nick noticed that the sun was rising. "Well, however long you lived you mustn't be very good at your job. Look." Nick pointed at the sun.

"Well, of course it's rising. What difference does it make now? It can't hurt you. You already died. Why don't we enjoy the sunrise together?" Schanke stood next to Nick.

Despite the fact that this is what Nick had been waiting for, he drew back almost in fear, steeling himself for what he knew would come. Perhaps this was how it happened for one of his kind. They said that suicide was the act of an unbalanced mind. Perhaps a crazy hallucination went along with it.

"I beg your pardon. I am neither a hallucination nor am I crazy," Schanke replied as if Nick's thoughts had been spoken aloud.

Nick's concentration was broken. It took a moment for him to realize that he felt the sunlight on his face and that while it was warm, it was not the fire that he had expected.

"Told you. You've been dead for centuries. A little sunlight won't hurt you."

Nick was confused. He took one step and propelled himself into the air only to land in the snow face down.

"I knew you were going to do that." Schanke called to him.

Now feeling more fear than he had in centuries, Nick backed away from Schanke, then turned and ran down the street.

"Yeah, Matrix looks like a much better prospect now." Schanke said as he disappeared into the falling snow.

Nick ran to the police station. He'd find the real Schanke and see what was going on.

"Can I help you?" The desk sergeant called out.

"Yeah, Mike, I'm looking for Schank."

"Is Sergeant Schanke expecting you?"

"Sergeant? Mike, it's me, Nick."

"Nick who, sir?"

"Nick Knight. I'm a detective here, remember? Work the night shift. Homicide. Ask Stonetree."

Picking up the phone, the desk sergeant quietly placed a call. A few moments later a man who Nick knew but didn't know approached. Clearly it was Schanke, but he now wore a sergeant's uniform. More than this had changed. One arm fell limp at his side and he dragged one leg.

"Schanke, what happened to you?"

"Who are you?" Schanke asked him.

"Nick, your partner, Nick!" Nick called out to his friend, barely concealing panic in his voice.

"I don't know you. Look, the Desk Sergeant said you claim to be a detective here. If you're just reporting in, let's see some ID."

"I've been working here for years. What kind of joke is this? Where's Stonetree? He can clear this up."

"Okay, that's it. I've put up with enough of this." Schanke said, grabbing Nick by the shoulder and propelling him down a corridor toward one of the interrogation rooms.

"Need any help, Sarge?" One of the young officers called out.

"Stay out of this. I may be a cripple but I'm not useless."

Taking Nick into the room, he motioned for him to sit down. Nick stared into his partners eyes and tried to find his heart-beat. He had to get some answers. But his powers were gone. That part at least was true.

"Alright whoever you are. Impersonating a police officer is a felony, and while some around here may think it's okay to make fun of Capt. Stonetree, I still respect the man no matter what he did. So if you are here to cause some trouble, you are going to get it back in spades. There is not much more they can do to me so I really have nothing to lose."

"Schank."

"Sergeant, call me Sergeant, Mr. Knight."

"Okay, Sergeant, what happened to Stonetree?"

"You really don't know? Okay, let's play it that way. He killed himself. Couldn't take the guilt after shooting some kid during a robbery."

"He didn't kill himself Schan... uh, Sergeant. It was all a set-up at that salvage yard. One of the robbers killed him and made it look like suicide."

"I don't know anything about a salvage yard. What I do know is the sound a police special makes when it goes off in the enclosed space of the Captain's office when you're outside sitting not two desks away. Stonetree couldn't take the guilt. You might think he was weak, but I know different. You're going to tell me who sent you here to play this joke or you are going to be very sorry." Schanke said these words with an edge angrier than Nick had ever heard in his voice. Schanke moved toward the door, "Think about it." He left the room.

"What the hell?" Nick said to the air.

"Yes, maybe hell is right for this situation." Nick looked up and saw Schanke, the smiling Schanke he remembered from the tower.

"What is going on?" Nick questioned.

"Stonetree died. He wasn't shot at that salvage yard. He never made it there. Killing that kid was too much for him."

"But he did that in self defense. No one believed he murdered that boy."

"Wrong. Plenty of people did. You weren't here to give him any encouragement. To tell him that you believed in him."

"But Schanke..."

"By the time of the shooting, Schanke was just getting out of the latest physical rehab program. See, you weren't here for him,either. That crazy police academy reject put a bullet in his back. His arm is completely paralyzed. He wears a brace on his leg that at least allows him to walk. He would have been pensioned off if it hadn't been for Stonetree. He got them to agree to keep Schanke around. Work a desk. Now that Stonetree's gone himself, the others keep Schanke around as a kind of debt of honor. Schanke knows it, though. Knows that he can't do the job. That he is pitied. He's taken to drinking. Been busted in rank a couple of times. His wife and kids left him. The only good thing you can say is that Stonetree will have company soon. Schanke will either take his own life or get so drunk he'll fall down, hit his head, no one will be around to help him and that will be all she wrote."

Nick jumped out of his chair and grabbed Schanke by the lapels. Recognizing the futility of the gesture, he still could not help himself. "Stop it. Stop it! You're lying!" By this time Nick was almost crying.

"Still think you only did evil? Never did any good? No one would ever miss you? Everyone would be better off without you? Well, let's just see." Schanke moved toward the door and with a theatrical gesture the door popped open.

"Why don't you visit the ladies of your life? See how they've fared."

Terror now gripped Nick. He left the police station. Amazingly, no one seemed to recognize him, but no one tried to stop him, either.

He traveled as quickly as he could to the morgue and was relieved to see Natalie standing with her back to him looking through a file drawer.

"Nat, please help me. I don't know what's going on."

Natalie turned. She had a terrified look on her once beautiful face, which was now deeply scarred. "Who are you? What are you looking at? Get out! Get out!" She was not the gentle, loving woman he knew. She was afraid and angry.

Nick left quickly only to run into Schanke. "Yep, that crazy flower guy really did a job on her. Cut her up good and then took her out into the country and dumped her. Some kids found her just in time. A shame they weren't a little later. She's full of hate now. Lives alone. Always will, by the way. I took a look at her permanent record too."

"I've had enough of this," Nick said to him.

"How many times do you think you can quit the game Nick my boy? The world may not revolve around you, but your actions did have consequences. No acts, no consequences.. And these are the results."

Moving past him, Nick went to pay his last call. He knew that at least one thing would be the same. He found the Club that had almost become a second home to him. It was still there but it was not the "Raven." Rather, it was the "Jackal," and it appeared to have a rather dark and dreary cast to the entrance.

Nick entered. It was empty except for one solitary figure sitting at a table in a dark corner. "Jeanette!" He called out to her.

"We are closed, Monsieur. Please come back this evening. I am sure that one of our girls could provide some excitement for you." This clearly was Jeanette, but she seemed even paler than normal. Her eyes were still the same beautiful color, but they were hollow. There was no spirit here. She was clearly the walking dead.

"Jeanette, it's me, Nick." He moved towards her and was about to touch her when a familiar hand grabbed his arm.

"She told you the Club is closed now. Why don't you be a good little boy and leave while you still can. Don't bother coming back tonight. Somehow I don't think this is your kind of establishment. We don't cater to dilettantes." With this last remark, La Croix pushed Nick so hard he had a difficult time keeping his balance.

Nick locked La Croix's eyes in his stare. La Croix's eyes glowed blood red.

"Nick, I've been looking all over for you. Found a gas station. Got the car filled up. We can go now." It was Schanke, pulling him toward the door. One final look at Jeanette filled Nick with sorrow. She had been a friend to him, but now she was afraid and lost.

Schanke pulled Nick out into the alley. "I know, I know. Why didn't I let you take him on. What could you do, kill each other? But the bottom line is, we are in human form and why take unnecessary chances? You know what I mean?"

"Jeanette." Nick said.

"Yeah, I feel sorry for her, too. She was on the list of possible saves once. Of course now, her future is somewhat hotter. You weren't around to give her hope. To show her that another path was possible. To give her the strength necessary to pull away from La Croix. She has served him for centuries. You would be appalled at what he has had her do. Together they have killed thousands and have caused more suffering than you can imagine."

He continued, "So are you ready to go? I haven't read the new version, but somehow I think a young Knight fresh from the Crusades can't have caused too much trouble. Probably you've got nothing to worry about. Just answer the gatekeeper's questions honestly. Oh, and no jokes. I found out he doesn't have much of a sense of humor."

"I want to go back."

"I thought we had this straightened out earlier. This is not a movie. I can't snap my fingers and change history."

"Why not? You did it before. Do it again. Please." Nick grabbed Schanke and pleaded with him.

"I..uh..well, it's really not up to me. You have to ask, you know, the big guy." Schanke said, pointing up to the heavens once more.

"I haven't prayed in centuries. What makes you think he'll listen to me?" Nick asked.

"He listens to all his children Nick, even the ones who have been on long journeys and are just coming home."

Looking up to the sky, Nick said, "Please."

"Please what, partner?"

"Schanke, I haven't done this in a long time. It's not easy."

"I know, the holidays are tough on us all. My wife thought I was nuts to walk out on her and the kids tonight. She swore that she would divorce me if I left her alone to assemble all those easy-to-assemble bikes and other goodies for the kids. But when both Jeanette and Natalie called saying something was up, I had to come looking for you."

"Schanke, is that you? Really you?" Nick called out with a huge grin on his face.

"Yes, Nick it's me. How much have you had to drink, anyway?"

"Schanke, I love you. Wait- you said both Jeanette and Natalie called you?"

"Mais oui, dear Nicholas. Your friends are rather tiresome but they do appear to be loyal. Somewhat like large friendly dogs." Nick turned and saw the Jeanette he so well remembered standing the doorway of the Club.

"Why don't you come in? You will catch your death, Nicholas." She called out to him.

"I don't think Christmas Eve in a bar would be such a good idea right now, Janet." Schanke replied.

"Jeanette, Jeanette, Detective."

"Whatever. Say, Nick, why don't you come home with me? You can sleep on the couch. Have Christmas morning with us."

"A Schanke Christmas. Sounds exciting." Jeanette said.

Nick was smiling ear to ear. Hearing these two, Jeanette and the real Schanke arguing was music to his ears.

"That's okay. I still have a few stops to make." Nick advised them. He went around the block where he was relieved to find out that this time when he tried to fly he did not fall to the ground.

"Make sure those stops aren't at any bars,okay?" Schanke called out to him.

Nick smiled. Much like Santa, he had many stops to make. By the start of the next business day, Capt. Stonetree was delighted to report that all of the lawsuits had been dropped. He had no explanation for it. Maybe it was the holiday season, but all of the complainants had suddenly had a change of heart.

Schanke was happy, too. The report of the shrink had come back. While Schank might have a strange sense of humor, he definitely was not unbalanced. Not any more so than the rest of them, at least.

Natalie was the most surprised of all when shortly before dawn on Christmas there was a knock on her door. Nick appeared carrying a dozen long stem yellow roses.

"Yellow roses mean friendship," she said taking them from Nick.

"I think they can mean a lot more," he said closing the door behind him and taking her in his arms. "I love you, Natalie Lambert."

"This seems like a scene out of an old movie," she said.

"Maybe a scene out of a new one. After all you ain't never had a friend like me," Nick said as he kissed her passionately.

ODO'S CHRISTMAS LIST

1. Latinum plated pail
2. Novelty noses
3. How to Gamble book
4. Gray's Anatomy
5. subscription to Interstellar Police Gazette
6. Travel thermos
7. Great Works of Art book
8. Shape-up video
9. Kung-Fu, the complete video collection
10. Jello party mold

THE IMMORTAL LEE

by Kathy Keetch

Chattanooga, Tennessee
October 23, 1864

Dear Henry:

Although we haven't gotten any mail, or much else, in or out since the battle of Chickamaunga when the Rebs chased us back here and penned us in, I'm going to put pen to paper once again. Nothing has happened yet to change our situation, but I think something is going to, and soon.

You probably heard even before we did that this army has been lumped with others into one big military department, and that General Rosencrans has been relieved of command and Pap Thomas put in charge. Any change is a change, and one was sure welcome here, though we did all like old Rosey. That seemed about all that was going to happen, though, and me and some of the other boys got to talking it over this afternoon. We'll talk about anything except food, since the idea is to get our minds off what we don't have, since noone knew anything else, after a spell we got to swapping tales. I didn't say much, mostly listened, same as Joe Nelson, because Teach and Russ got to telling stories.

I've got you about them before. Teach was a professor or something before he joined up, and he just can't help himself--every time he opens his mouth, something of history or science or philosophy falls out of it. What that man don't know isn't worth knowing. Russ, now, only <u>thinks</u> he knows everything. He was with the Army of the Potomac through the Mud March, getting himself transferred just in time to miss the victory at Gettysburg and instead get his ass whupped with the rest of us, and he somehow thinks that gives him the wisdom of the sages or something. But it is interesting when he gets started, sort of spreading himself, and then to watch Teach cutting him back.

As I said, we had started talking about the change in command, which got Russ talking about generals he knew, had served under, or had read about, and Teach correcting him or topping his stories. They talked about McClellan and Napoleon, Winfield Scott and Cortez and such, me and Joe not saying much, just kind of egging them on. Russ started getting the worst of it, as he always does, and, as he always does, he started talking about Bobby Lee.

I don't know what it is, either about Lee or the Army of the Potomac, but that old Reb has our boys so awestruck that they just assume they'll lose whenever they go against him--and Russ was at least at Antitiem, too, you think he'd know better, even if he wasn't there for Gettysburg. Well, he went on and on, how Lee had been offered command by Lincoln before he went South, how Lee could do this, how Lee would do that, how Lee was tall and handsome and every inch a soldier, until we were sick of the sound of his name. Joe and I looked at Teach, waiting for him to say something.

"You know, I know a story about a Lee that was handsome and brilliant," Teach began. I know I groaned, and I think Joe did, too. "He was Chinese," Teach continued, which made us laugh.

"I'm talking about General Lee and you're talking about some Chink?" Russ hissed at him.

"Worse, I'm talking about a Chink that wasn't even a general, he was a magician," Teach said right back at him.

"Maybe that's how Bobby Lee does it," I said.

"Could be," Teach said. "But this one, the older one..."

"Older than Lee?" Joe asked.

"This story Lee is thousands of years old," Teach said. "He's one of the Eight Immortals. He discovered the Elixir of Life."

"The what?" Russ asked before he stopped to think. (I told you he don't know everything, he just likes to let on that he does.)

"The Elixir of Life," Teach told him again. "It made him live forever."

"So he was young and handsome forever?" Joe asked, a little enviously I thought. Joe is getting a little gray and a lot bald.

"No, he wasn't. This Lee knew so much magic that he could leave his body and let his soul fly around, like an angel," Teach said, flapping his hands as he talked, like he could fly, too, "but while he was flying around his body would be laying there, empty."

"Dead?" I asked. I didn't much like the thought, you know. We've all seen too many empty bodies, whole and in pieces, to last us a lot of lifetimes.

"Well," Teach explained to us, "he looked dead enough that one day while he was out and flying around, some farmers found his pretty body, and they burned it."

"Damned heathens," Russ muttered.

"So what did he do?" Joe asked.

"Well, he had to take the first fresh corpse he could find," Teach said, "which happened to be an old crippled beggar, and he had to keep that ugly shape forever. So 'Lee the Immortal' is also known as 'Lee the Immortal Beggar' and 'Lee of the Iron Crutch'."

"And he lived happily ever after," I said, and then I started laughing. I couldn't help it, because of how Russ was glaring. How he hates to have his stories topped, especially when he's bragging on about getting whipped by Lee! Joe started laughing too, and then Teach. Just the thought of a plain old cripple being compared to Robert E. Lee was enough to start us up again whenever we slowed down laughing for a breath. We probably would still be laughing, except that just about the time we were falling down from it, we heard a group of horses approaching.

Now since we've been under siege here, with the horses and mules keeling over from starvation, a horse that's fit to be ridden means an officer, usually of pretty high rank. A group of them means a general and his staff, so we picked ourselves up to see who it was, and since it wasn't yet dark, we had a good view of the group as they came through the street.

The first thing we noticed was the fact that everyone was covered in mud, so we figured they must have just come over that mud slick glorified as the wagon road from Bridgeport. The second thing we noticed was that, as we'd figured, it was a general, a <u>major</u> general, and his staff and an escort, but we nearly started laughing again when we saw that the general's horse had a crutch strapped to the saddle. I think I did snort when I saw what an unimpressive little man was riding that big horse, and even Russ started to grin when Joe said, "It's the Old Man."

I <u>would</u> have started laughing then, major general or not, if I hadn't noticed that not only wasn't Joe laughing, he was looking like someone had just handed him a roast turkey with all the trimmings. I stared at him before I realized what he meant, then looked back at the General, who by then was past, heading towards Thomas' headquarters. Joe didn't mean that it was the old beggar Lee riding in, but that it was Old Man Grant.

That being the case, Henry, I thought I'd better take the time now to write. Tell Mother and Father that I'm well, and I think of them often. I hope to find letters from all of you once the siege is lifted, and I now expect that with Grant here, we'll have supplies coming through before a week is out. Of course, it also means that there'll be a big fight before much longer, but that's what I guess we joined up for. If I come through safe again, I'll write and tell you all about it. If I don't at least, I will have fallen in the best cause for which men have ever fought and with the foreknowledge that the battle will be a victory for the Union. And of that I am certain, because if he hasn't recovered completely from that fall his horse took on him last month, the Old Man can still beat the Rebs any time he goes against them.

Your brother,

Bill

OLD GOAT

(to the tune of "Master of the House", from Les Miserables)

by Andrea Fraud-Webber

Captain James T. Kirk
Goodness what a jerk
Chasing every ensign
Uniformed in skirts.
And he claims his job's
Exploring galaxies
The only place he's looked
Is 'tween the women's knees
Says the job of Star Fleet captain's
The one position that he ever sought
Let me tell you, dearie,
Of course he looks so weary,
The real one's what the missionaries taught.

VAMPIRE REPORTER
or
The Adventures of Stone Deadline on the Night Beat
by Mary Shapiro

Stone Deadline, ace reporter for the Hope Springs Eternal evening edition newspaper, stared blankly at the computer terminal screen in front of him.

He sighed.

Only half an hour until six a.m., when his ravenous and unsympathetic head copy editor would be after him for that last front page story.

The time limit meant even more to Stone. At six a.m., the sun would rise -- and Stone didn't want the shift to REALLY be the graveyard for this vampire.

This story had been a particularly tough assignment. If he could just get that last interview done -- without phone interruptions -- he'd sail through this article. It would practically write itself.

Ring.

Damn phone.

Ring.

Hope Springs Senator Jerry Mander wasn't supposed to call him for another five minutes. This call had to be a pesky PR flack who was an early riser and knew his hours.

Ring.

Sigh.

"Deadline, what can I do for you?" he answered flatly.

A nasal voice whined in his ear. "Hello, Mr. Deadline? This is Maeca Pitch, with the Hope Springs Older Adults Retirement and Relaxation Community."

Geez, Stone thought, an old folks home.

"I'm so sorry to bother you. But I wanted to let you know we're having a simply marvelous photo opp at the home. Tomorrow, all our residents will be gathering for a spring tea party. Doesn't that sound exciting? So, Mr. Deadline, can we get a photographer and reporter out here?"

Deadline could feel his fangs grow longer.

His blood pressure rose -- or, actually, the pressure of other peoples' blood in his veins rose. A green light -- a shade greener than the blank terminal screen -- flooded his eyes.

"You're calling me THE DAY BEFORE THIS THING HAPPENS?" Stone growled.

Th-thump.

"You think there's anything EVEN VAGUELY INTERESTING ABOUT A BUNCH OF PEOPLE AT A TEA PARTY?"

Th-thump.

Pitch answered in a pinched voice.

"Em, er -- perhaps you're right -- perhaps I'll never call you the day before something is going on -- maybe I'll give you more notice," she whined placatingly.

Th-thump.

"Sure -- maybe I should think twice about suggesting dopey, everyday stuff and trying to make it sound like its a once-in-a-century extravaganza," Pitch said, shaken.

Th-thump.

Stone grinned happily.

"Sounds like a plan -- well, Ms. Pitch, I'll be talking to you later. I'd love to chat more but -- I'm on deadline," Stone snapped.

Slam, went the receiver.

Ring.

Finally!

"Gotta be Jerry!" Deadline thought to himself.

Twenty minutes left till six -- but he could do it if he composed right on the computer screen.

"This Deadline?" the gruff voice on the other end of the line asked.

The pompous bureaucrat was on a speaker phone.

"Thanks for calling back, Senator -- just got a couple questions on that new development proposal you're looking at. You know. The one next to the nursery school," Stone quipped.

Silence on the phone.

"Well, I can talk to you off the record, but I'm not gonna put my butt in a goddam sling for you," Mander mumbled.

Stone ground his teeth.

Th-thump.

Again, his eyes glowed green.

Th-thump.

"Um, well, maybe I can talk on the record," Mander said, his words quavering.

Th-thump.

"Did I tell you one of the development partners, Michael Milkem, is a drinking buddy of mine? Oh, yeah, we're thick as thieves," the politician rambled on.

Stone believed that -- the thieves part, anyway.

"Sure! Hey, the hell with what those dumb parents and snivelling little brats think! You figure we'd raise much taxes from a school? Hell, no! Give me a 10-story shopping mall any day," Mander said enthusiastically.

"He's nailing the lid on his own coffin," Stone thought happily.

Oops - speaking of that...time was getting short until sunup.

Deadline concentrated hard. One more "th-thump" and Jerry Mander would be sure to make the newspaper's "quip of the week" section.

"Geez! You think we'd ever get anything done if we listened to neighbors when development comes in?" crowed the politico, cock sure of himself.

And speaking of cocks and crowing...

"Well, Jerry, thanks for your time," Stone said, typing frantically on the screen to keep up with Mander's comments. "We'll talk to you later."

Slam.

Tap, tap, tap - taptaptaptaptaptap.

Five minutes to go - but, hey, no problem.

Deadline stopped for a moment to try to come up with a good lede.

Just then, a grumpy, mustachioed man suddenly came stomping up to Stone's cubicle. Charley Moody, head copy editor, frowned at the reporter.

"You realize we gotta have that story to composing in three minutes?" Moody mumbled. "Do you have any idea what time it is? Why don't we just hold the story and replace it with -- uh -- that feature about vegetable growing by old people in their backyards?" he suggested.

EEEEEK! thought Stone -- not on the front page!

Then he smiled.

Th-thump.

Th-thump.

A smile suddenly appeared on the head copy editor's face.

"Well, umm, maybe I was wrong -- naw, I'm sure composing doesn't have to have your story for another 15 minutes at least. Hey, you take your time, Stone. Get a cuppa coffee. Hey, you can even go to the john, if you want," Moody offered generously.

Th-thump. Th-thump.

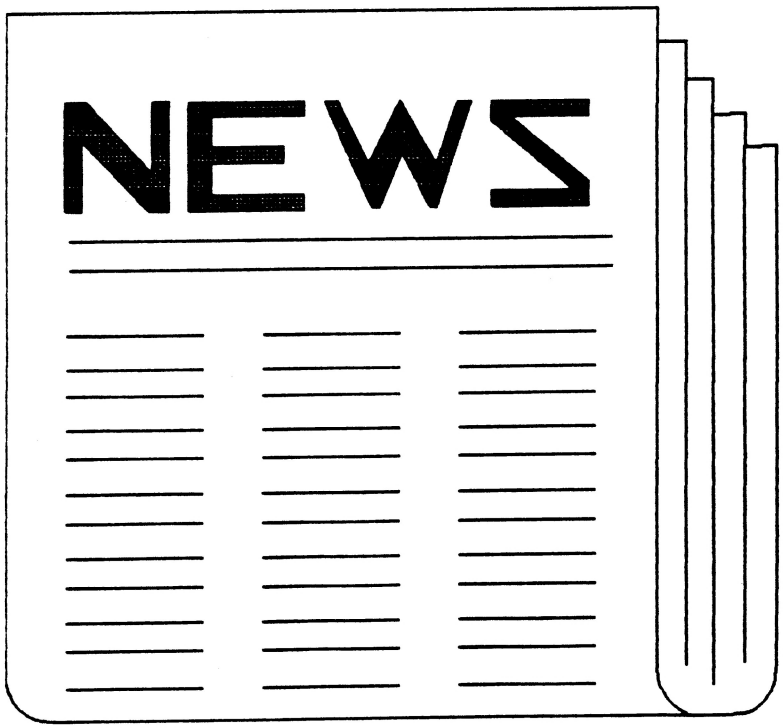
"You been doin' a great job, Stone -- keep up the good work," Charley said, and wandered vaguely back to his own desk.

Stone breathed a sigh of relief. The lede was done.

He sent the story over the computer to the copy editing basket.

There was a faint pink glow in the sky outside his cubicle window. Time to go home, Stone thought.

The power of the press was still alive -- even if Stone Deadline, ace reporter, wasn't.



A Fan Like Me
by Evelyn Adrian

Somewhere in the vicinity of Pluto, a titanic television popped into being. Before it, a watcher appeared, clutching a remote control the size of a car.

PING! went the ON button. A tall grey bunny and a black duck went dancing across the screen. The starry sky resounded to, "Overture! Curtain lights! This is it, the night of--"

ZAP!

The bunny and duck were replaced by a mysterious black-clad figure astride a horse. Brilliant blue eyes flashing, the masked man drew a sword and--

ZAP!

This time the images were black and white. A pleasant faced lady wearing a demure string of pearls was frowning in a motherly way at an engagingly innocent boy. "Now Beaver," she began--

ZAP!

A car holding an unshaven blond man in carefully casual clothes and a black fashion plate in an Armani suit streaked across the screen, sirens blazing.

ZAP!

"You are special," sang a soft-voiced, rather elderly man in a neat cardigan sweater and sneakers. "Can you say special? I knew you could!" he continued, smiling.

SNAP!

And the screen went dark.

"Can you say 'bored'? I knew you could," groaned the wielder of the remote control. Except for one tiny detail--blue skin--he looked and sounded just like the sweater-clad oldster. Abruptly, the figure <u>was</u> a board--a big plank with eyes, nose, and a down-turned mouth. "And I thought I was bored trapped inside the lamp," it sighed. "Phenomenal cosmic power, and I can't even find a first-run TV show."

Resolve hardened the wooden features. "Gotta get out of this funk!" The board transformed into a large, blue-skinned middle-eastern type, complete with a black top-knot and a beard that ended in a curly point. The former Genie-of-the-lamp floated among the stars, pondering. Being omnipotent, he mused, did have its' drawbacks. Trapped in the magic lamp, TV had been his only solace. Magic had allowed him to watch every television show or movie ever created. And 10,000 years in the Cave of Wonders had been more than enough time to memorize all of it, Genie reflected sadly. It was enough to depress even a naturally enthusiastic person like him.

Genie straightened suddenly, and a huge light bulb began flashing on and off over his head. "I've got it!" he shouted to the astonished stars. "I'll make my own television show! Cool!" He danced rapidly around Jupiter a few times in celebration. Coming to a breathless halt, Genie pushed up non-existant sleeves, pointed his finger, and...nothing happened. Nothing at all.

"I don't know what to do!" he said, comically surprised. "What do you think?" he asked the stars. "Any suggestions?" The

stars just twinkled. Genie drooped, discouraged. "Guess not. I'll just have to find someone who can help me. Now where," he asked thoughtfully, adopting the classic 'Thinker' pose, "are the most creative minds on Earth?" He frowned. "Hollywood?" A huge desk blinked into being, Genie behind it in a flashy suit. Waving a huge cigar, he bellowed "Babes! I want cop shows and babes!" He blinked back to normal. "Nah, that's exploitation without representation."

Genie rubbed his chin, frowning in concentration. He snapped his fingers. "I know! Disney!" Orchestral music sounded as he shrank to Tinkerbell size and produced a wand. A wave of it sent a washes of color through space. They quickly resolved themselves into mermaids, flying elephants, hippo ballerinas, and a bewildered mouse in an oversize wizard's robe and conical hat. They faded as Genie returned slowly to his usual size. "Guess I'm tooned out," he concluded unhappily. The wand vanished in a puff of golden dust.

"So where do I go?" Then Genie smiled. "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." His blue skin became a swarthy brown even as twentieth century jeans and a Hawaiian shirt appeared on his now human-size frame. "Next stop, the Galleria. A little window shopping ought to cheer me up."

***

"So what happened to Sam <u>after</u> he leaped into the soccer player?" queried a voice. Genie pricked up his ears. Strolling casually through the second level of the mall, he had been passed by a foursome of young women. They seemed to be chattering animatedly about one of his favorite TV shows--but he didn't remember this episode. He picked up his pace to stay with them, listening intently.

"...and then Al told Sam that when he was hit by the ball, he won the playoff game for them by knocking it into the goal," finished another voice triumphantly. The speaker, a short brunette in stirrup pants and an oversize T-shirt, dug through the 'Save the Earth' canvas bag she was carrying, finally coming up with a handful of typewritten pages. "Here's the rest of it, hot off the word processor."

Genie was fascinated. A manuscripted version of the program, for an episode that had never aired? He'd never dreamed of such a thing. Itching for a closer look, he edged closer.

"Dibs!" cried the first voice. Genie saw that it belonged to a long-legged strawberry blonde who at this moment had a dangerous gleam in her eye. The other two, a petite blonde in jeans and a curly-haired brunette in a business suit, exchanged knowing glances. Nobody challenged her, and the papers changed hands, all without anyone missing a step. Genie craned his neck to see, too, only to get a reproving look from all four. Guiltily, he dropped back. The quartet walked on even more briskly.

Trying another tack, Genie changed into a fly and buzzed onto the strawberry blonde's shoulder. This worked until--

"Hold still, Heather! There's a bug on your shoulder!"

Genie looked up to see the blonde taking aim. "Please don't!" he said in a tiny, buzzy voice. "I only want to read the story too."

Not surprisingly, this brought them to an abrupt halt. Three pairs of eyes stared at the fly with the Genie's blue face in miniature. The strawberry blonde was trying, not too successfully, to look at her own shoulder. The blonde's hand stayed poised in midair.

Heather quavered, "What is it, Sarah?"

"A talking bug," said Sarah, her blonde hair nearly standing on end from the shock.

"Come on, guys. If this is a joke, it isn't funny." Heather looked ready to spin her head completely around in the effort to see. "If there's a bug, get it off."

"I'm not a bug," protested Genie, hurt.

"WHO SAID THAT?"

"The bug," provided Sarah helpfully. Heather moaned.

"If you aren't a bug, what are you?" asked the business-suited one reasonably.

"Could you just get it off my shoulder, Margaret!" begged Heather. "Ask questions later!"

"Sorry," said Genie contritely, and obligingly took off. This was not going well at all. At a loss, he stared back at the four pairs of eyes now trained on him. Didn't the twentieth century know anything about magic?

Margaret was not to be put off. "Well?," she asked. "What are you?"

"Or who?" asked the short brunette, peering closely at Genie as he hovered before them. "You look familiar, somehow."

Sarah stared. "How could a talking bug be familiar?" she asked, wondering if her roommate was going crazy. More likely they were all going crazy together, considering, she decided.

"Definitely not a bug!" Genie buzzed. "Here, I'll show you." He snapped back to his mall-walking persona. Passers-by rubbed their eyes and told themselves they were imagining things. "Genie's the name. Ever heard of me?"

"I knew you looked familiar!" smiled the brunette. "My name's Emily. And you're the Genie of the lamp, aren't you?"

"Not anymore! I'm a free agent now. You know, like 'The Oz.'" A baseball uniform replaced the jeans and shirt as Genie plucked a bat out of thin air and swung it. They all ducked. Heads turned. This was an awful lot to ignore.

"Cool!" exclaimed Heather, when it was safe to stand up. "Aladdin is my all time favorite Disney movie!" Emily and Sarah agreed enthusiastically. Margaret smiled politely, and didn't mention that she preferred Beauty and the Beast.

Progress at last! Pleased, Genie returned to his normal appearance, blue skin and all, and gave a flourishing bow. The few heads that hadn't turned their way after the baseball player appeared now zeroed in on the little group. A crowd began to form with frightening speed.

"We seem to be attracting an awful lot of attention," commented Sarah nervously, "Not to mention an irate mall cop,"

she added, spotting a uniform. "How about going somewhere else to talk?"

"No problem," said Genie eagerly. "Where would you like to go? Bangkok? Toronto? Camelot?"

A wave of awe passed visibly through the group. Up to now, no one had had time to consider the possibilities. Heather took a deep breath and began, "How about--"

With a worried look, Emily interceded hastily, "How about our place, Sarah? There's nobody there to surprise." Pointedly she looked around her at the eager press of faces.

"Good idea," said Margaret. "And we'd better make it fast or I'll be calling my father to bail us out of the clink," she added urgently as the mall cop reached them.

"You've got it," proclaimed Genie. He snapped his fingers, and their surroundings changed suddenly to Sarah and Emily's living room. He beamed at them, clearly expecting applause. None was forthcoming. Everyone looked a little shell-shocked.

"Uh, thanks," said Emily a little shakily.

"My pleasure," smiled Genie, executing another little bow.

"There is one small problem, though," she added, voicing the thoughts of the group. "We all got to the mall in cars."

"A minor detail." Genie pointed his finger. Light arced from it through the front door for a few seconds. "Got 'em." The four looked at each other for a moment, then there was a general rush for the window.

"All right! There's my Toyota, right in front," said Heather happily. "And Margaret's is right next to it."

"My Honda, too," said Emily, relieved.

Margaret, of course, had a question. "How did you know--"

"Magic." Genie shrugged modestly. It was oddly satisfying to show off his powers for mortals again. He hadn't had so much fun in centuries. Maybe he'd missed the little buggers.

Sarah had been examining the front door for scorch marks. Fortunately, there weren't any, but the momentary worry had made her stop and think. She turned and asked Genie, "You know, we never asked--why were you following us at the mall?"

"You all know my story, right? Trapped in the lamp?" A miniature Genie stared sadly at them from inside a transparent lamp. "Buried in the Cave of Wonders for ten thousand years?" A diorama appeared in midair. In it was the golden, lion-like figure that was the mouth of the Cave of Wonders. A turbanned figure threw in the lamp, and the cave collapsed and became one with the sand. Genie reappeared. "I was bored stiff after the first fifty years. So I watched TV. All of it. Over and over again." His figure blurred, running with eye-straining rapidity through the earliest characters on television in black and white, on into the color era, and ending with some futuristic characters that none of his audience recognized.

"Wow," breathed Heather. "That was really something."

Emily took off her glasses to rub her eyes. "Amazing," she agreed. "Maybe you could slow it down next time?"

"But that had to be before television was invented," objected Margaret. Genie just looked at her. "Okay, so it was magic. That still doesn't answer Sarah's question."

He had been hoping they would forget about that. "Uh, oh. Confession time. Boy, is my face red." Snickers were heard as this became the literal truth. "I started, well, listening in--" Here Genie's right ear became enormous "--when I heard you talking about a Quantum Leap episode I hadn't seen." Puzzled looks were exchanged, and Genie prompted, "The one about the soccer game?" A soccer ball appeared in his hand, and he tossed it to Heather. "It couldn't have been on television. So where did it come from?"

Emily was amazed. "That's not a real episode. That's just my story for our fanzine."

"Fanzine?" Genie looked puzzled now. "Is that some kind of Hollywood slang?" In a flash, he acquired a tan, a surfboard, and a Valley accent. "Like, totally radical, dudettes. I mean, really, like, gnarly!"

Four voices intoned, "Oh, boy," in unison.

Margaret said brightly, "Well, Emily, it's your story. Do you want to explain what a fanzine is?"

"I'll defer to Sarah. After all, she's the editor. If any one can explain it, she can."

Sarah wasn't having any. "Oh, no you don't. You guys dragged me into this fan thing kicking and screaming. I'm not about to try to explain it."

Heather rolled her eyes expressively. "Oh, come on, you guys. All we have to do is show him one. How hard can that be?"

Genie looked at them so hopefully, Emily began to laugh. "Okay, okay, I'll try to explain it." She began to ransack her bookcase. "I just hope you aren't expecting too much. We're just fans of the show. We get an interesting idea, we write a story. Lots of fans like us do. She pulled out a booklet, one of dozens of similar style, Genie noted happily. This looked very promising. "Here's our 'zine from last year. We did a lot of Quantum Leap stories. I know there isn't anything too outrageous in here."

"Not unless you count Fauna's crossovers," reminded Margaret. "They're pretty esoteric."

"I can handle it," said Genie accepting the slim volume eagerly. "Just give me something besides all those reruns. I've even seen the TV movies a million times."

"But there aren't any Quantum Leap TV movies," protested Heather. "Barring a miracle, we just saw the last episode--ever."

"Don't be so sure, little lady," drawled Genie, dress and voice a la John Wayne. "You can't keep a good series down. Besides," he added, back to himself again, "I've seen them. They played in--oops, 1994. They haven't come out yet. Sorry."

"Don't be," said Margaret happily. "That's great news for us. We can wait."

Genie smacked his forehead. "What am I thinking of? You don't have to." Emily's television snapped on, and the Quantum Leap credits began to roll. "It's the least I can do." Smiling at their squeals of joy, he sat down for a good read. This looked like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

MAC ATTACK!

MacGyver runs into Murdoch disguised as a

1
Lady
Nurse
General
Frenchman

who uses a

2
rope
bow & arrow
fire
dynamite

to

3
hang
shoot
burn
explode
run over

Mac. MacGyver gets hurt in the

4
arm
leg
stomach
head
little ~~toe~~ finger

but survives. Returning back home Mac finds a message on

5
paper
answering machine
radio
burned in wood
singing *telegram*

from Murdoch saying he has kidnapped

6
Jack
Penny
a mouse
his hockey stick

and thrown them in a

7
dungeon
tractor trailer
mineshaft
alligator pit
tub of jello

. After solving Murdoch's

puzzle
rhyme
riddle
Doctor's prescription

8

, MacGyver arrives at Murdoch's hideway. Naturally the entrance is

guarded
locked
concealed
painted in Red, White, and Blue
covered in duct tape

9

, so Mac uses

his swiss army knife
turpentine
a branch
a paperclip
more duct tape

10

to enter. MacGyver

walked
ran
crawled
transported
(oops: wrong genre)
skipped

11

into the building. About halfway down the hall,

the floor
the ceiling
the walls
his clothes

12

gave way and he slid into

underground
lake
a steel cage
pit of snakes
a lady's arms
mud puddle

13

Of course, Mac finds an ingenious way to escape by using

duct tape
water faucet
snake teeth
swiss army knife (again!)
mold on the walls

and finds his way to where

14

is being held captive. To rescue

6

, Mac once again uses

6

---

duct tape
swiss army knife
more duct tape
another blade on the knife
more duct tape

. Murdoch confronts them as they leave. He tries to kill them all but his actions backfire when he

falls down mineshaft
attacked by snakes
falls into jello
slips on a banana peel

.

16

DOES MURDOCH SURVIVE?

Get Serious! (Which might be a little difficult after winding your way through this adventure.)

BIJOU THEATER PRESENTS

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KNIGHT WATCHMEN

(or, Justice May Be Blind, but it Still Has Teeth)

PROLOGUE

When we last visited our intrepid adventurers, the Night Watchmen, they were scouring the city of Toronto, hot on the trail of professional assassin Meredith Beckett. Their search through the seamier side of the city brought them to "The Raven," which, unknown to them, is a "watering hole" for Toronto's vampire population.

Meanwhile, Toronto's finest vampire detective, Nick Knight, was searching for Beckett after having foiled her latest assignment. He, too, goes to "The Raven," hoping that club-owner Jeanette has some information on Beckett's whereabouts. She tells him that two men (Nick Marshall and Jericho Gibbs) arrived recently asking for the same information. Last she saw, they were headed toward the "Game Room" with Alma and friends.

As Knight bursts into the room, Marshall and Gibbs are about to become a midnight snack...

Marshall lay sprawled out on a velvet-covered couch, numbness pervading his limbs. He could do nothing as the strange woman with the glowing eyes unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it down off his shoulders. His heart beat heavily in his chest, and he found it impossible to concentrate. "Gibbs," he moaned, struggling to turn his head toward his friend. He saw that Gibbs was in the same predicament, and a stab of alarm made its way through his foggy brain. He tried to get up, but it was no use. The woman was leaning closer, her face filling his vision...

"No!" Knight growled, grabbing Alma by the shoulder and whirling her around to face him just as her fangs were about to sink into Marshall's jugular. Seeing their leader chastised, the other two women backed away from Gibbs. "Now, get out!" Knight roared for good measure, fangs bared, eyes glowing a fierce green.

"It's alright," Alma drawled as she passed. "I'm on a diet, anyway."

When the others had gone, Knight walked over to help the two men sit up. "You two all right?" he asked, surreptitiously scanning them for puncture wounds.

"Yeah," said Marshall, with more conviction than he felt. "What happened?"

"Nothing, fortunately," Knight answered.

"You call that 'nothing'? Gibbs protested, indignant. "Did you see the teeth on those chicks, man? If I didn't know better, I'd say they were vampires."

Knight gave a humorless smile. "Detective Nick Knight, Toronto police," he announced, flipping open his badge for their inspection. "Talk like that will earn you a night in the drunk tank." He pulled the two to their feet and eyed them purposefully.

"He was just joking, weren't you, pal?" Marshall cut in, plastering an appropriately silly grin on his face.

Gibbs looked as if he might protest again, but changed his mind when he felt Marshall's elbow in his ribs. "Yes, sir, officer sir," Gibbs agreed hurriedly. "But--"

"Save it," Knight said abruptly, looking past him and noticing the striking brunette in the doorway. "What can I do for you, Jeanette?" he asked.

Jeanette undulated toward him, her black chiffon dress whispering as she walked. "We can talk about that later, Nichola," she promised with a throaty laugh. "For now," she continued, squeezing his arm, "why don't you take your friends outside? The other patrons are getting...curious."

"Wow," breathed Gibbs, admiring the view as Jeanette left the room. He turned to Knight. "Man, I gotta know what cologne you're wearin'!"

Knight pressed his lips together. "Okay, boys, let's take it outside," he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Once he had escorted the two safely out of the club, he turned back to Marshall. "Let's have it. Who are you, and what's your connection to Meredith Beckett?"

"Meredith Beckett?" Marshall echoed, stalling for time.

"Never heard of her, man," Gibbs added, shrugging his muscular shoulders.

Knight was unconvinced. "Stop playing games," he commanded. He turned to Marshall. "I know you were asking about her in there. Why? What's the connection?"

As their gazes locked, Marshall's heart once again began that slow, heavy beat, so loud he could almost hear it. "She's evil," he whispered, despite his resolve to say nothing. "And she knows who I am."

"And who are you?" Knight asked. An anguished expression contorted the man's features, and a thin film of perspiration beaded his brow. 'He's actually trying to pull away,' Knight realized in amazement. 'Your will is strong', he thought. 'But mine is stronger'. "Who are you?" he repeated. "You must tell me."

"I'm..." Marshall began, no longer able to resist.

"Nick, look out!" Gibbs screamed.

Both men turned their heads at the sound of their name, just in time to see a black Cadillac jump the sidewalk, heading straight for them. Only Knight's superior strength and speed saved Marshall from certain death, plucking them out of the way at the last moment.

"I saw her, Nick!" Gibbs shouted, gesturing toward the car as it squealed around the corner and sped off into the night.

"Give me a minute, will you, Gibbs?" Marshall snapped, wincing as he eased himself up off the sidewalk and brushed the dirt from his trousers. "Now, who did you see?"

"Marilyn Beckett!" Gibbs exploded.

"Meredith," Knight corrected, noting their dismay at being reminded of his presence. "Well...Nick," he continued smoothly, "Meredith may know you, but she certainly doesn't like you. Stay here."

Knight ran around the corner, heading in the same direction the car had gone. As soon as he was out of sight, Marshall peered after him. He saw the policeman stop and reach into a turquoise blue Caddy and pull out a police radio. "Probably calling for backup," Marshall muttered to himself. "Let's go." He motioned to Gibbs and they began running toward their rented van.

"So, what's the plan?" Gibbs puffed, sweat pouring off his ebony skin as he tried to keep up with Marshall's furious pace.

"We follow him to Beckett," Marshall puffed. "But we've got to get to her before he does--"

"Or the whole 'Night Watchmen' gig blows up in our faces," Gibbs finished for him.

"You got it," Marshall agreed, sliding into the passenger seat. He hadn't heard the Caddy's engine--maybe they still had a chance.

Gibbs maneuvered the van so they could look down the street. The car was still there, but there was no sign of Knight. "Where the hell did he go?" Gibbs frowned. "He couldn't have gotten far on foot."

"Never mind him," Marshall muttered, distracted. "At least we know we're on the right track."

Gibbs put up a defensive hand. "I hope you're not expecting me to go back in that club, man. I am <u>not</u> going back in there," he declared.

"No," Marshall said impatiently. "Beckett won't be back tonight. She'll have to set up another meet."

"So what now?"

"Let's head back to the hotel and see what Moon and Kelly have come up with."

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Moon looked up from the computer screen and stared at Kelly, irritated. "Look, kid, would you just sit down? It's hard enough to focus on this blasted computer screen without you pacing!"

"Where the hell are they?" she ranted, ignoring him. Moon dropped his head in his hands as she continued. "It's three o'clock in the morning! They should have at least checked in by now!"

"Maybe they couldn't find a phone, Mommy," Moon muttered under his breath.

"What?" Kelly stopped in front of him, her blue eyes glaring fiercely.

Moon's head came up, and he moved back in his chair instinctively. "Whoa, take it easy, Kell," he soothed. "Nicky knows how to take care of himself."

As if on cue, Marshall and Gibbs walked in. Kelly's eyes narrowed as she took in their dishevelled appearance. "Rough night, boys?"

"You said it!" Gibbs blurted before Nick could stop him. That last joint we hit was incredible! We were nearly--"

"Run down by Meredith Beckett when her car took a detour onto the sidewalk," Marshall cut in hurriedly.

Kelly strolled over to have a closer look, her blue eyes scanning every detail of Nick's appearance. After a moment she reached up to fold his rumpled collar. "Are you sure that was the only close encounter you had tonight?" she asked in a deceptively sweet voice.

"Why do you ask?" Marshall asked warily, beginning to squirm under her scrutiny.

For answer she pulled the edge of his collar down into his view, revealing a tell-tale stain. "I never knew cars wore lipstick," she drawled.

Nick shrugged her off. "The important thing is, we know Meredith Beckett is still in town. Moon, see what you can dig up on a nightclub called 'The Raven'."

"Sure thing, boss," Moon answered briskly, making a mental note to question Gibbs later.

****

Knight walked into the Raven, scowling so fiercely that the other patrons gave him a wide berth. 'I'm really battling a thousand tonight,' he thought bitterly. 'I lost Meredith Beckett and two key witnesses. All these vampiric powers and I'm still no closer to an answer.' Like always, he ended up coming back to Jeanette for help.

"Ah, Nichola, I was hoping you'd return," she purred, draping an arm around him. She felt the tension in his body and pulled back to look at him. "It's those mortals, isn't it?" she asked, a fierce protective light in her eyes. "Perhaps I should have let Alma have her fun."

"I appreciate the sentiment," he said. "Unfortunately, I have no idea where they are. The same goes for the Beckett woman."

"Well, I make it a policy never to help you find women," she said archly, "but perhaps this might help with the other two." She placed a hotel room key in his palm. "Alma took it from one of your...friends."

He kissed her cheek. "Lady, I am forever in your debt," he whispered, turning to go."

"Forever is a long time, Nichola," she called after him.

Knight knew the sunrise was just around the corner, so he drove at breakneck speed to the precinct house. He dashed over to where Schanke was sitting, threw the key on the desk and said tersely, "Find out who this hotel key belongs to. I'm going to bed. I'll call you tonight." Before Schanke could open his mouth, Knight had disappeared back out the door.

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After a very late lunch, the "Night Watchmen" had gathered in Marshall's room to discuss their findings.

"Moon," Marshall began, "what did you find out about the 'Raven'?"

Moon replied, "Next to nothing. That place is weird. All I dug up on the computer was that it's 10 years old and owned by Duchesne Enterprises, which is almost certainly a dummy company. When I tried to talk to people in person they all clammed up and ignored me."

"Well, sometimes nothing is something to work on," Marshall retorted. "Let's move on. Kelly, you were going to check with some of your mob connections to see who the contact is. Any luck?"

"Sorry, Nick," Kelly replied. "Most of my connections are south of this border. I'll need a little more time."

"Okay, Gibbs, it's up to you," Marshall growled as he turned to the man still munching on the last of his sandwich. "What juicy tidbits do you have to offer?"

Gibbs started to speak but stopped to wipe off some mustard that had dripped from his chin. "How's a guy supposed to get any info from the media when all I can get from the TV is that damn French?"

Moon gave a bark of laughter. "You should've seen him, Nick. Mr. Electronics Wiz went all the way to the front desk to complain. Turns out all he had to do was flip a switch on the set."

"Laugh away, hot shot. You didn't exactly make it through the French computer networks without any scratches," Gibbs replied with a hurt look on his face. The two men continued to argue. Marshall started to interrupt, but the phone rang. He picked it up, answered hello and then handed it to Kelly.

"It's for you."

Kelly listened for a while. Her face changed slowly to a pleased expression as she spoke back into the phone. "Thanks. I appreciate your help." She hung up the phone and started to speak when she noticed Gibbs and Moon still arguing. "Guys!" she said at the top of her voice. "I think we hit pay dirt."

A hush fell over the room as all eyes turned toward her. She continued in a more dignified tone. "An acquaintance of one of my ex's old buddies says he heard about a hit that went bad here last week. He says it's going down again sometime late tomorrow night."

"Did he say where?" Marshall prompted when Kelly paused.

"No, Nick," Kelly said, "but he thinks he knows the contact Meredith Beckett's going to meet to set up the new hit. He says they're going to meet at a warehouse in the 1200 block of 3rd street at 10 pm.

"Well, what do you say guys?" said Marshall. "Shall we crash the party?"

"I was going to wash my hair," Kelly answered, "but I guess I can wait till later. Let's do it."

****

Knight was on his way to the police station when the call came through the radio.

"Yo, Nick," he heard Schanke say, "Got a lead on that key for you. Thought you might want to check it out before coming in to the station."

"Great," Knight said. "What's the story?"

"Key's for the Toronto Hilton, room 428, under the name of Jericho Gibbs."

"That's them, all right." he said with some satisfaction. "I think I will check it out now. Thanks, Schanke. I owe you one."

"I'll hold you to it, pal," Schanke assured him.

Knight made a u-turn and headed for the Hilton. Tonight, he would get some answers.

'No sense in spoiling the element of surprise,' Knight thought, levitating to the 4th floor balcony. Maybe a quick peek would give him more to go on. He reached Gibbs window just as he was leaving the room. It wasn't much of a peek, but it would do. Knight used his superior strength to force the lock on the sliding door. He thought briefly about searching the room, but decided he'd learn more if he followed Gibbs, wherever he was going. With any luck, he'd find his pal 'Nick', and then he was going to get to the bottom of this whole mess.

Knight followed Gibbs to the lobby, where the man met up with 'Nick' and two others he didn't recognize--an older man of about sixty-five and a beautiful blond woman with blue eyes deep enough to drown in. 'If I were about 765 years younger...' he thought.

He waited until they had gone out the lobby doors before he followed. Peering outside, he saw them all pile into a white van. 'Perfect,' he thought. 'I'll be able to spot them easily.'

Ten minutes later, the van stopped at an abandoned warehouse. Before getting out of his car, Knight radioed for backup. Then he followed Gibbs and company into the darkened warehouse. His acute hearing picked up their conversation at once.

"This isn't like you, Nick," Kelly whispered urgently. "We don't even have a plan."

"We'll do whatever it takes," Nick insisted. "I won't let her slip through my hands this time."

Kelly worriedly replied, "I think you're taking this vigilante business a little too personally."

Knight's attention was distracted from this revealing exchange when he detected two more voices at the far end of the warehouse. The first voice he recognized as Meredith Beckett's.

"It's about time you got here. I can't stay around too long. Our last meeting was a little crowded."

A man's baritone replied, "It's all set up for one a.m. this morning. The poor slob will never see it coming."

"Of course he won't," Beckett said disdainfully. "I'm the one doing the hit."

'Well, that's enough to nail Meredith,' thought Knight. 'Now all I have to do is keep the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew out of harm's way.' He spotted Gibbs in the dark recesses of the

warehouse. Walking noiselessly across the room, he placed a hand on Gibbs' shoulder. "Remember me?" Knight asked.

"Whoa, Officer Knight!" Gibbs gasped. "You scared the life out of me!"

"If he didn't, this should," said Meredith, aiming her gun at Gibbs' chest and pulling the trigger.

"Look out!" Kelly shouted.

Gibbs squeezed his eyes shut, expecting a bullet, but was instead shoved to the ground just as the gun went off. When he opened his eyes, he saw Knight crumpled on the ground with Kelly leaning over him.

"Good, but not good enough," Meredith hissed, aiming her gun at Gibbs once more.

"Why bother with him?" Marshall shouted, hoping to distract her. "It's me you want."

She whirled around to meet the new threat. "So true, Judge Marshall," she agreed coolly. "And I always get what I want." Her aim was perfect, but Marshall would not die today. Kelly picked up Knight's gun and fired, forcing Beckett off balance. The bullet entered Marshall's leg.

Gibbs was startled into action, racing across the warehouse to help Moon pull Marshall behind a crate. "'Bout time you showed up, man," Gibbs grumbled.

"Hey, I didn't get this old without learning to duck," Moon snapped back. "You might try it sometime."

Kelly joined them after using one well-aimed bullet to dispatch Beckett's accomplice. "Any bright ideas, boys?" she asked, breathless. "We got one dead cop and one dead flunky, but that viper is still out there--and we're out of ammo."

"I say we pray for a miracle," Moon mumbled.

Marshall was about to say he didn't believe in miracles when a low growl echoed through the warehouse, followed by a blood curdling scream.

"What the hell was that?" Moon asked nervously, the hair on the back of his neck standing up.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Gibbs muttered.

"Personally, I like to know what I'm up against," Kelly declared, her bravado almost convincing as she straightened from her crouching position.

"Oh, my God!" she breathed before sinking back to the floor.

"What? What?" demanded Gibbs.

"Kelly, what is it?" asked Marshall, concerned when she took so long to answer.

She knew she should answer them, but what could she say? That the policeman who saved them from certain death was a killer himself? That she had caught a glimpse of that killer, fangs exposed, eyes glowing an unearthly green? When she spoke, her voice was shaky. "He's alive...and she's dead."

"What?" exclaimed Moon, scrambling to his knees so he could peer over the crate. "She's right, Nick," he confirmed. "It's just like she said."

"How?" Marshall began.

"Let's not argue with success, Nick," Kelly said briskly, thankful for the sirens she heard in the distance. "Let's get out while the getting is good."

"But what about Detective Knight?" Marshall asked. "He'll need our statements if he wants to stay out of trouble with Internal Affairs."

"I don't think we should worry about that now," Kelly said, panic rising in her throat as Knight came toward them. "I think we should get you to a hospital."

Marshall mistook the reason for her fear and reached out to touch her hand. "It's okay, Kell. It's just a scratch."

"The lady's right. You should go to the hospital," Knight said, his eyes on Kelly. "If I need answers to any questions, I'll make them up." For Kelly's ears only, he added, "I'll trust you to do the same."

"You saved our lives," Kelly said solemnly as she handed him back his gun. "It's the least I can do." No longer afraid, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Am I missing something?" Marshall asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Justice has its' secrets, Judge Marshall," Knight said, his mouth turning upwards in a semblance of a smile. "You of all people should know that."

YOU BOUGHT THIS 'ZINE BECAUSE...
(check all that apply)

___ Nick Knight told you to. (Th-thump, th-thump)

___ Everything is a song cue.

___ Justice may be blind, but it can read a 'zine in the dark.

___ You were caught in a chronic hysteresis and were getting bored.

___ You thought it was Odo.

___ Blackie told you it was the "Special of the Day."

___ Counselor Troi said it was better than chocolate.

___ "You ain't never had a friend like me."

___ The Force works on weak minds.

___ You just leaped in and you're trying to get your bearings.

___ You thought it was a universal remote.

___ You think Lovejoy and Lady Jane should get together.

___ "Damn it, Jim, I'm a doctor, not a 'zine writer!"

___ "It seemed logical at the time."

___ Every good boy deserves fanzines.

___ Lovejoy said it would be valuable someday.

___ Quark tricked you into it.

___ You couldn't think of one good reason not to.

___ Dr. Bashir wouldn't lend you his copy of "Frontier Medicine."

___ It was cheaper than playing d'abo.

___ You always knew there was an orchestra.

___ You deserve the best.

___ You were so impressed with Changing Channels 1 and 2 (which, by the way, are still available).

MATRIX

DOCTOR WHO

CHANGING CHANNELS

LOVEJOY

3

STAR TREK

CHANNEL SURFING

FOREVER KNIGHT

DS 9

QUANTUM LEAP

DARK JUSTICE

WIZARDS AND WARRIORS